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A black and white photograph of Claude Lévi-Strauss, an elderly man with glasses, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie. He is standing behind a dark podium, looking down at a book or document he is holding. A microphone is positioned in front of him. The background is dark and out of focus.

## CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS: THE VIEW FROM AFAR



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Claude Lévi-Strauss at UNESCO's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration (2005).

A selection of articles written by Claude Lévi-Strauss for the UNESCO Courier from 1951 on, excerpts from studies, previously unpublished documents with some of his photos and sketches from the 1930s that he has kindly given us permission to print - and throughout, the excitement of discovering an exceptional scholar's path. Follow this odyssey in our special issue celebrating the 100th birthday of Claude Lévi-Strauss on 28 November.

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*“No doubt we take comfort in the dream that equality and fraternity will one day reign among men, without compromising their diversity.”*

*Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Race and Culture”, 22 March 1971,*

*UNESCO*

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# IN THIS ISSUE

Jasmina Šopova

//The efforts of science should not only enable mankind to surpass itself; they must also help those who lag behind to catch up”, Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote in his first UNESCO Courier article published in 1951. He contributed to the magazine regularly during the 1950s suggesting ideas he later developed in the works that made him world-famous.

Recommending the unification of methodological thinking between the exact sciences and the human sciences, he underlined in another article that “the speculations of the earliest geometers and arithmeticians were concerned with man far more than with the physical world”. Pythagoras, for one, was “deeply interested in the anthropological significance of numbers and figures”, as were the sages of China, India, pre-Colonial Africa and pre-Colombian America, “preoccupied” with the meaning and specific attributes of numbers.

His idea grew into a thesis on the “mathematics of man – to be discovered along lines that neither mathematicians nor sociologists have as yet been able to determine exactly,” and destined to be “very different from the mathematics which the social sciences once sought to use in order to express their observations in precise terms,” as the father of structural anthropology explained in a 1954 article published in the Social Science

Bulletin, another source for this issue.

“Our sciences first became isolated in order to become deeper, but at a certain depth, they succeed in joining each other. Thus, little by little, in an objective area, the old philosophical hypothesis...of the universal existence of a human nature is borne out”, he said in a 1956 document preserved in the UNESCO archives, which opened their doors wide so that this special issue could be, if not definitive, as varied as possible.

Throughout, the idea of the sciences’ crucial role in humanity’s development, and more specifically the interaction of the human and exact sciences, stands out as a fundamental concern for this remarkable personality, who

had a close relationship to our Organization from the time of its foundation after the Second World War. You can read about it in the article “Claude Lévi-Strauss and UNESCO” by the anthropologist Wiktor Stoczkowski.

Already in 1950, the author of “Race and History” – a classic anti-racism text, commissioned by UNESCO – was striving to prove it was useless to combat the idea of “racial” inequality as long as we perpetuated the idea of inequality in societies’ cultural contributions to humanity’s common heritage.

Down through the years, and all along the pages of the articles you will find in this issue, Lévi-Strauss insisted forcefully that the West had forgotten the lessons it could learn from the East; that when in Europe



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**Caduveo bracelet brought back by Lévy-Strauss from the Mato Grosso (Brazil).**

• • • the mentally ill were kept in chains, so-called primitive peoples were treating them using methods akin to psychoanalysis; that a ceremonial meal among the Kwakiutl was not so different from a banquet in a so-called civilized country; that all humans speak, make tools and follow certain rules of behaviour, and this is what makes them human, not what they use to build houses. All these examples nourish the themes advocated by UNESCO since its creation.

But Stoczkowski also evokes the tension arising in 1971 and casting a shadow over the eminent anthropologist's relationship with UNESCO. It was provoked by Lévi-Strauss's speech at the launch of the International Year for Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination. That essay, "Race and Culture", would nonetheless have international impact.

We are releasing the sound recording of that speech for the first time in 37 years, in this issue (in its on line version) of the UNESCO Courier.

On 16 November 2005, Lévi-Strauss returned to UNESCO to celebrate the Organization's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. You will find out about this special and moving occasion in the different sections of this issue, which also includes some of Lévi-Strauss's manuscripts and a previously unpublished interview he gave UNESCO on 20 November 2006, a week before his 98th birthday.

This is the first time the UNESCO Courier adds sound and

*"Nothing indicates racial prejudices are diminishing and indications are not lacking to suggest that after brief local respites, they surge up again elsewhere with renewed intensity. Which is why UNESCO feels the need periodically to take up again a struggle whose outcome is uncertain, to say the least."*

*Claude Lévi-Strauss,  
"Race and Culture", 1971*

video (on line) to its text to enrich the content of our special tribute to Claude Lévi-Strauss, celebrating his 100th birthday this year. It is also the first time most of the included articles by the famous anthropologist appear in Arabic, Chinese and Russian. This issue gave us the additional opportunity to revise the Spanish and English translations of previously published texts. We would like to thank Cathy Nolan and Francisco Vicente-Sandoval who revised the articles in the two languages.

Thanks also to Jens Boel and Thierry Guednée for the selection and digitization of the archive documents in this issue, like the report

dated 13 March 1964, in which Claude Lévi-Strauss expresses his reserve with respect to UNESCO's project to carry out a study on the research trends in the social and human sciences. Several documents reflecting the discussions the subject inspired at the time are also included (on line). In addition to the "chapter on anthropology" written a year later by Claude Lévi-Strauss, an "additional contribution" by the anthropologist Luc de Heusch, as well as brief and incisive comments by Professor S.A. Tokarev from the Soviet Union, are featured. ▲



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Hat band brought back by Lévi-Strauss from the Mato Grosso in Brazil.



# CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS AND UNESCO

One of the architects of the first UNESCO declaration on race (1950), author of *Race and History* (1952) and *Race and Culture* (1971), written at the request of UNESCO, Claude Lévi-Strauss participated in the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the Organization (2005). Half a century of history.

**Wiktor Stoczkowski,**

*École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris. Author of Anthropologies rédemptrices. Le monde selon Lévi-Strauss (2008).*



© Claude Lévi-Strauss

**Claude Lévi-Strauss in the United States. Between 1940 et 1944, he founded the “École libre des hautes études de New York”.**

The first contribution of Claude Lévi-Strauss to the deliberations of UNESCO goes back to 1949: he participated then in the international commission of scholars entrusted with drafting the first UNESCO declaration on race, published consecutively in 1950. In the same year, he was commissioned by UNESCO to carry out an inquiry into the state of social sciences in Pakistan. In 1951, he sat on the committee of experts convened to set up the International Social Science Council, of which he was the first Secretary-General, from 1952 to 1961. In 1952, on the request of UNESCO, he wrote *Race and History*, which was to become a classic of antiracist literature. In 1971, invited to inaugurate the International Year for Action to Combat Racism, Lévi-Strauss gave a lecture entitled *Race and Culture*. This lecture was not in keeping with the doctrine of the Organization, and it undermined the relationship. There has, however, been reconciliation in recent years, as was

shown by the attendance of Claude Lévi-Strauss at UNESCO's sixtieth anniversary celebrations in 2005.

These vicissitudes show the parallel development, over half a century, of the thought of Claude Lévi-Strauss on one hand, and of the doctrine of UNESCO on the other. The main topic with which both dealt was the biological and cultural diversity of mankind.

## Agreements...

In his twenties, Claude Lévi-Strauss was a committed political activist belonging to a circle of young socialist intellectuals, who were profoundly affected by the catastrophe of the Great War, which they had not participated in. They were all virulently pacifistic and anti-nationalistic. The revolution to which they aspired would have to be made without violence, by a radical transformation of the moral conscience,

which would lay the foundations of a new humanism, necessary to build an egalitarian, fair and peaceful society. They wanted relationships between peoples to be placed under the responsibility of international authorities, which would be able to resolve conflicts between States without recourse to war. These ideas were close to the programme of the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, which already prefigured the principles of UNESCO's future doctrine in the 1920s and 1930s. It was therefore natural for Lévi-Strauss to respond favourably in 1949 to the invitation to participate in the activities of the Organization, whose programme embodied his own convictions so well.

After the disaster caused by Nazism, one of the priorities was to delegitimize

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© UNESCO  
**Race and History in Japanese.**

... the ideology of the inequality of races. UNESCO intended to promote the ideas that had previously been disputed by Nazism: the unity of mankind, the arbitrary nature of racial classifications, the equality of humans, the harmless effects of miscegenation and the instinct of cooperation as an essential property of humans. Such was the main message of the first UNESCO declaration on race (1950).

Following this text, several brochures for the general public were quickly published, conceived by UNESCO's Division for the Study of Race as an instrument of an "educational offensive". The contribution of Lévi-Strauss was *Race and History*. Its interest was to offer an argument that could remedy a major defect of UNESCO's anti-racist doctrine. What good was it – as Lévi-Strauss said – to establish that no biological data confirmed the idea of the inequa-

lity of "races", if one allowed the belief in inequality in its cultural dimension to endure, by which the conviction that societies are not able to make equivalent contributions to the common heritage of civilization remained intact? The solution proposed by Lévi-Strauss consisted in showing that the ability to make cultural progress was not linked to the superiority of one society compared to others, but rather to the aptitude of everyone to establish mutual exchanges with others. Thus, by making exchanges the fundamental condition for progress, *Race and History* was in perfect harmony with the ideology of cooperation, whose propagation UNESCO wished to promote.

### ... and disagreements

Nineteen years later, when he was invited to deliver the inaugural lecture of the International Year for Action to Combat Racism, Claude Lévi-Strauss had a much more critical view of UNESCO's doctrine than in 1952. He confessed that he doubted that "the spread of knowledge and the development of communication among human beings will some day let them live in harmony, accepting and respecting their diversity". The fight against racism had proved ineffective – he concluded –,

because the initial diagnosis, which was at the root of the Organization's programme, was erroneous right down to its fundamental principles: the racial form taken by intolerance was not a result of false ideas about race; it had a much deeper basis, whose ideas were just an ideological distortion, deployed to conceal the conflict that, according to Lévi-Strauss, resulted from the demographic saturation of our planet.

The paradox is that Lévi-Strauss conceived this vision of the harmful impact of demographic growth when he was led to take an interest in demographic questions at the International Social Science Council, where he had taken the initiative to organize several seminars on demography.

Following the lecture, the disagreement with UNESCO's doctrine became manifest. Lévi-Strauss felt that UNESCO was going astray by wanting to reconcile two opposed tendencies: civilising progress leads to growth in populations, which encourages cultural exchanges, but the latter ...



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**Claude Lévi-Strauss and René Maheu (UNESCO, 1971).**

• • • lead to the obliteration of cultural diversity, while at the same time demographic saturation causes its inevitable share of intolerance and hostility towards peoples that have become rivals. In this situation, Lévi-Strauss came to maintain the right of every culture to remain deaf to the values of the Other, or even to contest them. This amounted to replacing the conception – defended by UNESCO – of humans spontaneously open to the Other and brought to cooperate with their fellow humans, by a conception of humans naturally inclined to be if not hostile, then at least reserved towards the Other.

Xenophobia – in the very moderate form that Lévi-Strauss gave to it, that of insensitivity to the values of the Other – is here transformed from a fact of modifiable culture into a fact of ineradicable nature. As a result, for Lévi-Strauss the UNESCO project became partially ineffectual, as one cannot hope to change unalterable human nature by action taken on its social element, through education and the fight against prejudice.

These words shocked the listeners. One can easily imagine how disconcerted UNESCO employees were, who, meeting Lévi-Strauss in the corridor after the lecture, expressed their disappointment at hearing the institutional articles of faith to which they thought they had the merit of adhering called into question. René Maheu, the Director General of UNESCO, who had invited Lévi-Strauss to give this lecture, seemed upset. “It was quite a scandal,” said



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**Claude Lévi-Strauss and Koïchiro Matsuura (UNESCO, 2005).**

Lévi-Strauss, commenting on the incident and the reactions that it caused in 1983, in the preface to *The View from Afar*, in which the text of *Race and Culture* was included [published in English by Basic Books].

### Diversity: a precious heritage to preserve

And yet, twenty-four years later, Claude Lévi-Strauss once more climbed onto the dais of the great auditorium of the UNESCO Building, invited to make a speech on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the Organization. This time, the lecture caused a reaction that was diametrically opposite to the previous one: the audience rose to its feet in a long and enthusiastic ovation. Paradoxically, in 2005 Lévi-Strauss said more or less the same things as in 1971. He repeated that the demographic explosion is a catastrophe that is responsible for our ills; that it leads to an impoverishment of cultural diversity; that to maintain this diversity, it is necessary for peoples to limit

their exchanges and keep their distance from each other.

If the ideas that were considered scandalous in 1971 could receive a warm welcome at UNESCO in 2005, it is because the doctrine of the Organization had changed during the quarter of a century, coming closer to the vision of which Claude Lévi-Strauss had been one of the first defenders. The founding project of UNESCO planned to deploy educational action on a worldwide scale, with the intention of achieving social progress and constructing a “new human unity”, to use an expression commonly used in the book *Basic Education, Common Ground for all Peoples* (1947): in fact, this programme consisted in wanting to impose the same cultural model everywhere, a model principally conceived by Westerners. At the end of the 1940s, such a unifying movement was held to be revolutionary, progressive and redeeming. In 2005, the perspective of UNESCO had reversed by comparison with this initial conception. Unification now had

• • • the grim name of “globalization”, and was seen as a threat to diversity, which was no longer perceived as an obstacle to progress, but as a precious heritage

to be preserved. Claude Lévi-Strauss had been defending this point of view for decades. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, he could note that

UNESCO had joined him in this conviction. The humanist stance of the anthropologist and the mission of UNESCO have found a new resonance. ▲

#### Declaration on Race (1950)

### «Race» – a social myth

At its twentieth session in 1978, UNESCO’s General Conference adopted, on November 27th, a resolution concerning the implementation of the Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice.

The very first document at the origin of this Declaration is the Statement by experts on race problems (July 20th 1950). Claude Lévi-Strauss was one of them.

#### Excerpts

1. Scientists have reached general agreements in recognizing that mankind is one: that all men belong to the same species, *Homo sapiens*. [...]

4. In short, the term “race” designates a group or population characterized by some concentrations, relative as to frequency and distribution, of hereditary particles (genes) or physical characters, which appear, fluctuate, and often disappear in the course of time by reason of geographic and or cultural isolation. [...]

5. These are the scientific facts. Unfortunately, however, when most people use the term “race” they do not do so in the sense above defined. To most people, a race is any group of people whom they choose to describe as a race. [...]

6. [...] Because serious errors of this kind are habitually committed when the term “race” is used in popular parlance, it would be better when speaking of human races to drop the term “race” altogether and speak of “ethnic groups”.

7. Now what has the scientist to say about the groups of mankind which may be recognized at the present time? [...] Most anthropologists agree on classifying the greater part of present-day mankind into three major divisions, as follows: the Mongoloid Division; the Negroid Division; the Caucasoid Division. [...]

9. Whatever classification the anthropologist makes of man, he never includes mental characteristics as part of those classifications. [...] the tests have shown essential similarity in mental characters among all human groups.

11. So far as temperament is concerned, there is no definite evidence that there exist inborn differences between human groups. [...]

13. With respect to race-mixture, the evidence points unequivocally to the fact that this has been going on from the earliest times. [...] Statements that human hybrids frequently show undesirable traits, both physically and mentally, physical disharmonies and mental degeneracies, are not supported by the facts. [...]

14. [...] For all practical social purposes “race” is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth. The myth “race” has created an enormous amount of human and social damage. In recent years it has taken a heavy toll in human lives and caused untold suffering. [...]

15. We now have to consider the bearing of these statements on the problem of human equality. It must be asserted with the utmost emphasis that equality as an ethical principle in no way depends upon the assertion that human beings are in fact equal in endowment. [...] Nevertheless, the characteristics in which human groups differ from one another are often exaggerated and used as a basis for questioning the validity of equality in the ethical sense. [...] every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main, because he is involved in mankind.



## The idea of subjective population density

In his "Preliminary Memorandum on the programme of the International Social Science Council", dated 27 February 1953, Claude Lévi-Strauss tackled the problem of demography. A few excerpts.

"Demographers have considered population problems from a perspective that is too exclusively objective. But population density is not only the result of the number of inhabitants per square kilometre or the ratio between needs and resources", he says.

### Excerpt.

Other factors come into play; thus, the development of means of communication leads to a manifold increase in contacts between individuals (when one considers roads and means of transport) and between minds (when one widens the problem to means of intellectual communication). Populations react differently, according to whether they are aware of their objective density or not, whether they are delighted with it or fear it, whether they minimise it or exaggerate its effects.

In order to evaluate demographic change, it is necessary to include in the variables studied by demography other variables, whose study is an element of all social sciences: law, economic science, political science, sociology, social anthropology and psychology.

There is also a specific aspect of the same problem, to which A. Sauvy, President of the United Nations Commission on Population, has drawn my attention, and which, demographers agree, requires the contribution of social sciences: it is the different way – which is absolutely unpredictable on the basis of purely demographic analysis – in which every country reacts to increasing demographic pressure. This reaction may be positive, like in Holland, almost nonexistent, like in France, or negative, as has been the case in India. Here, once more, only a comparative study of legal systems, political institutions, economic situations, traditional customs and group psychology would make forecasting possible.

### The expanding dimensions of national groupings

It is a common idea that the current political world consists of national groupings that are no longer of the same order of magnitude. Europe still consists of States of a size that could be called traditional when compared to the size of the United States, the Soviet Union, China or India. It is generally admitted that these "Super-States" represent a type of normal structure for the modern world, hence the movements for European unification. Therefore, we now have not only extreme forms at our disposal for observation, but all sorts of intermediate forms. It would be very interesting to study the consequences of the expansion of national groupings. One may *a priori* formulate the hypothesis that large States could not have the same type of legal, political, economic and social structure as small ones, and that communication between their members must be made in different ways. Among these differences, what are those that exclusively or predominantly depend on the size of groups? Such a problem requires the contribution of demographers (who are currently studying the problem of minimum population sizes), anthropologists (who study very small groups), historians (who, with the formation of nationalities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, know about a process of the same order, even if it operated on a smaller scale), and, finally, for obvious reasons, lawyers, economists, sociologists and psychologists.

It is not certain that this method would make it possible to determine an optimum size of national groupings, a problem that already preoccupied Auguste Comte. But one might reach conclusions and hypotheses that would help statesmen, especially in Europe, by making it possible for them to foresee the consequences of their efforts towards federation or unification.

# PAKISTAN – SPIRITUAL HOME AND NATIONAL REALITY

There is more to Pakistan's troubles than merely economic problems, asserts Lévi-Strauss in the first article he wrote for the Courier, in May 1951. A young nation founded on an ancient civilization, Pakistan synthesizes in its problems the whole of human development.

Claude Lévi-Strauss

Of all the countries which make up our inhabited globe, Pakistan is perhaps the one which presents the most unusual characteristics. The laws defining its existence declared it was founded as a state where all Moslems could live according to the principles of Islam. As such it provides a spiritual home for all members of a single religious community regardless of their national origin. Nevertheless, Pakistan remains in the deepest sense of the word a nation. It groups under one unified authority lands that for thousands of years have been inhabited by the same people, most of whom have shared for centuries the same moral, politi-

cal and religious principles forming the basis of the new state

This dual aspect – the spiritual home and the national reality – characterizes the Pakistan of today. It explains too, certain paradoxes. For although Pakistan's hope is to bring together Moslems from all over pre-partition India, in reality 40 million Moslems – or roughly 30 per cent of the total number – are still scattered in other parts of the sub-continent.

As a nation, Pakistan has defined frontiers and distinctive geographic and sociological features. As a spiritual home, it somewhat anticipates its national individuality. For it must mould itself – with undiminished creative zeal – in the image of the great promise it wishes to be, not only for its own people but also for all those who some day may come seeking a means of life in keeping with their faith.

## The Golden Fibre

One has only to glance at a map to understand the complexity of



© Kiran Zindagi

Pakistan "was founded as a state where all Moslems could live according to the principles of Islam"

the problems confronting this nation which has set itself such lofty requirements. Not only do a thousand miles of Indian Territory split East and West Pakistan but differences in climate, physiography and even language separate the two regions. Eastern Pakistan, though by far the smaller area, has the larger population; yet it is West Pakistan, which is less fertile, that compensates for the food shortages of the eastern zone. This zone (East Bengal) is almost entirely devoted to the cultivation of jute- the crop which enables the government to balance its national budget.

Pakistan happens to hold practically a world monopoly of raw jute yet not only is the country unable to convert the fibre for lack of any jute-goods industry but inadequate port facilities even impede its exportation.

To remedy this situation, the government has embarked on a series of vast industrialization projects for

• • •

*"But who better than UNESCO can draw the attention of scientists and technicians to the fact (which they so often tend to overlook) that the purposes of science are not only to solve scientific problems but to find answers to social problems as well."*

• • • the construction of the first jute mills in Narayanganj, a hydro-electric dam and a paper mill on the Karnafully River, additional port facilities at Chittagong, a new port at the Ganges Delta, power stations at Malakand, and sugar refineries at Mardan.



© Claude Lévi-Strauss/musée du quai Branly  
**Young Kuki girls from Boshonto (Bangladesh), photo taken by Claude Lévi-Strauss en 1951.**

But the immense problems of financing these projects and of transforming a large portion of illiterate peasants into technically and socially educated workmen present formidable obstacles. Here United Nations and UNESCO Technical Assistance and U.S. Point IV programmes may help in meeting some of the difficulties.

Partition and with it the independence of Pakistan brought in its wake immense misery and suffering. Since 1947, eight million refugees have trekked into West Pakistan (Sind and Punjab) from all parts of India, leaving behind them everything they cherished— their personal belongings, their fortunes, their land and the tombs of their ancestors – in order to join the spiritual community of their own choosing;

Despite the efforts of the Central Government, hundreds of thousands of these refugees still

live in conditions that defy description. Undoubtedly material aid must first be given to the adults; but surely the problem of re-adapting and rehabilitating the children is no less important than that of other children during and after the last world war when psychologists, sociologists, psychiatrists and educators from all over the world



© UNESCO/Patrick Lagès  
**In East Pakistan (Bangladesh), entire villages lived only by the manufacture of mother-of-pearl buttons.**

joined to find a solution.

## Pearl button crisis

Similar problems – and others even more specialised – also face East Bengal. To solve them will require no small degree of

imagination and international collaboration. For even the most intensive jute cultivation cannot be expected to absorb the manpower or assure the livelihood of population which exceeds in density 2,500 inhabitants per square mile. In fact for centuries the people have sought a secondary means of income in cottage industries,

such as the manufacture of muslin cloth which has made Dacca famous. But even these rural crafts are conditioned by unique circumstances. They depend on international markets not only as a source for raw materials but as a sales outlet for the finished products.

To take a specific case, in East Bengal, I recently visited a number of villages of incredible poverty in the region of Langabund not far from Dacca. There, over 50,000 people live only by the manufacture of mother-of-pearl buttons. These buttons of the kind used for cheap tee-shirts and underwear, are produced in huge quantities by hand tools which might well have belonged to the early Middle Ages.

The raw materials needed for their production such as chemicals, cardboard and the foil span-gles used to mount the buttons on the cardboard, have ceased coming in from abroad since Pakistan became independent.

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continue on page 16

# THE WEST HAS MUCH TO LEARN FROM ASIA

Europe, by forcibly incorporating the still primitive Asia in a world economic system that was solely concerned to exploit raw materials and manpower, brought about a crisis, which today it is its duty to remedy, declares Lévi-Strauss in this June 1952 Courier article.

## Claude Lévi-Strauss

*This is an abbreviated version of the article published in the International Social Science Bulletin, Vol. III, No. 4, trimestrial journal published by UNESCO.*

If there is one notion that a European seeking to understand the problem of south Asia must banish from his mind, it is that of the "exotic". Contrary to what so many suggestions in literature and travellers' experiences may imply, the civilizations of the East are in essence no different from those of the West.

Let us take a look at the bare remains that the passage of the centuries, sand, floods, saltpetre, rot and the Aryan invasion have left of the oldest culture of the East – the sites in the Indus valley, Mohenjodajo, Harappa, 4,000 to 5,000 years old. What a disconcerting experience! Streets straight as a bowstring, intersecting each other at right angles; workers' quarters with houses of dreary, unvarying design; industrial workshops for the milling of flour, the casting and chasing of metals, or the "mass production" of those cheap goblets whose remains still litter the ground; municipal granary occupying (to use a modern term) several "blocks"; public baths, drains and sewers; residential quarters providing comfortable yet graceless homes designed more for a whole society that lived in comfort than for a minority of the well-to-do

and powerful – all this can hardly fail to suggest to the visitor the glamour and blemishes of a great modern city, even in their most advanced form as Western civilisation knows it, and as presented to Europe today, as a model, by the United States of America.

One would imagine that, over four or five thousand years of history, the wheel had come full circle – that the urban, industrial, lower middle-class civilization of the towns of the Indus valley was not so basically different (except of course as regards size) from that which was destined, after its long European incubation, to reach full development only on the other side of the Atlantic.

Thus even in their earliest days, the most ancient civilisations of the Old World were giving the New World its lineaments. Admittedly, the twilight of an ancient history of uniform design marked the dawn of other, heterogeneous histories. But the divergence was never more than occasional.

From the days of pre-history down to those of modern times, East and West have constantly striven to re-establish that unity



© Toufiq Siddiqui  
**Ruins of Mohenjodaro (Pakistan),  
UNESCO World Heritage site.**

which diverging lines of development have undermined. But even when they seemed to diverge the systematic nature of their opposition – the place seen at each extreme, geographically and one might even say morally, of the most ancient and the more recent scene, India on one hand, America on the other – would supply additional proof, if such proof were necessary of the solidarity of the whole.

## Amazonia and Asia – so similar, so different

Between these two extremes, Europe occupies an intermediate position, a modest position no doubt, but one she strives to make worthy by criticizing what she regards as excesses ● ● ●



• • • in the two extremes: the paramount attachment, in America, to things material and the exaggerated concentration, in the east, of things spiritual. Wealth on one hand, poverty on the other, situations with which it is attempted to deal by two conflicting economic theories involving, as an article of faith, "spending" in one case and "saving" in the other.

When having spent long years in both of the Americas, the writer last year received, from a Keeper of Bengali manuscripts, his first lesson in Asiatic philosophy, he might have been enticed into an over simplified thesis. The picture was this : against the Amazon region of America, a poor and tropical but under-populated area (the latter factor partly compensating for the former), was set South Asia, again a poor and tropical, but this time over-populated area (the second factor aggravating the first), in the same way that, of the regions with temperate climates, North America, with vast resources and relatively small populations, was a counterpart of Europe, with comparatively small resources but a large population.

When, however, the picture was shifted from the economic to the moral and psychological plane, these contrasts became more complex. For nothing seemed further from the American pattern than the style

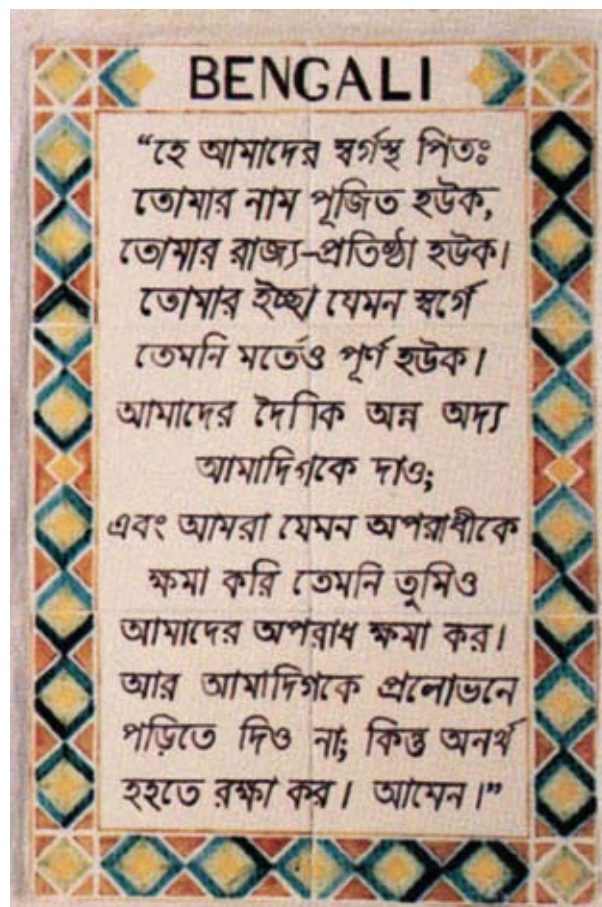
of life of this sage, whose pride lay in walking barefoot and having, as his sole earthly possessions, three cotton tunics which he washed and mended himself, and who thought he has solved the social problem by cooking his food on a fire of dead leaves, collected and ground up with his own hands.

This doctrine of systematic reduction of needs, this effort to minimise contact and exchange between people and things, this withdrawal into oneself to cease encroaching on others and at the same time ensure better communication with Being, do not grow out of a form of thought that opposes Western thought. In fact, certain Western scholars who have studied the problems of Southeast

Asia adopt as their final conclusion an only slightly rationalized form of these traditional solutions. It is because the latter are a rather logical result of the difference in situation between Europe and Asia in face of a series of historical upheavals that are fundamentally the same for both, but with an impact they endured in opposite ways.

## The reverse side

When one flies over vast territories of South Asia, from Karachi to Saigon, and once the desert of Thar has been crossed, this land divided up into the smallest plots and cultivated up to the last acre, at first sight seems somewhat familiar to the European. When it is looked at more closely, however, a difference emerges. These faded, washed out shades of pink and green, this irregular formation of fields and rice-paddies constantly appearing in different designs, these boundaries blurred as if in a patchwork – the whole carpet, so to speak, is the same; but because form and colour are less clear, less well-defined than in the landscapes of Europe, one has the impression of looking at it "wrong side up". This is, of course, merely an image. But it reflects rather well the different positions of Europe and Asia in regard to their common civilization. From the material point of view, at least one seems to be the "reverse side" of the other;



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Bengali manuscript.

• • • one has always been the winner, the other the loser, as if in a given enterprise (begun, as we have said, jointly) one had secured all the advantages and the other all the embarrassments.

In one case (though will it always be so?) an expansion of population has paved the way for agricultural and industrial progress, so that resources have increased more quickly than the number of people consuming them; in the other, the same phenomenon has, since the beginning of the 18th century, assumed the form of a constant lowering of the amount taken by each individual from a common pool that has remained more or less stationary.

It is to the birth and development of urban life that Europe has come to attach its highest material and spiritual values? But the incredibly rapid rate of urban development in the East (e.g. in Calcutta, where the population has increased from 2 to 5 million in the space of a few years), has merely had the effect of concentrating, in the poverty-stricken areas, such misery and tragedy as have never made their appearance in Europe except as a counterpart to advances in other directions. For urban life in the East means nothing but promiscuity, the most elementary lack of hygiene and comfort, epidemics, under nourishment, insecurity and phy-

sical and moral corruption resulting from over-concentrated, collective existence. Everything that, in the West, seems merely to be a pathological accident attending, for the time being, a normal process of growth is, one might say, a normal state of things in the East, which plays the same game but is condemned to hold all the worst cards.

Yet, without going back four



© UNESCO/ Jean Mohr

**Crowd of workers in Bangladesh.**

or five thousand years, this striking misfortune seems to have been neither inescapable nor of very ancient standing. As recently as the 17th and 18th centuries – thanks no doubt, very largely, to the Mogul emperors, who were admirable administrators – the population of south Asia was not over-numerous, and there was an abundance of agricultural and manufactured products. European travellers who saw bazaars extending from 15 to 20 miles into the country (as, for instance, from Agra to Fatipur Sikhri) and selling goods at what seemed to them ridiculously cheap prices, were not sure whether or not they

had arrived in the “land of milk and honey”.

It can never be stated often enough that it was Europe, which by forcibly incorporating the still primitive Asia in a world economic system that was solely concerned to exploit raw materials, manpower, and the possibility of new markets, brought about (involuntarily no doubt, and no less through the benefits than through the abuses of the process) a crisis, which today it is its duty to remedy.

Comparing itself with America, Europe acknowledges its own less favourable position as regards natural wealth, population pressure, individual output and the average level of consumption; rightly or wrongly, on the other hand, it takes pride in

the greater attention it pays to spiritual values. It must be admitted, *mutatis mutandis*, that Asia could reason similarly in regard to Europe, whose modest prosperity represents, for her, the most unwarranted luxury. In a sense, Europe is Asia’s “America”. And this “Asia” with less riches and more population, lacking the necessary capital and technicians for its industrialization, and seeing its soil and its livestock deteriorating daily while its population increases at an unprecedented rate, is constantly inclined to remind Europe of the two continents’ common origin and of their unequal situation • • •

• • • in regard of their exploitation of a common heritage. Europe must reconcile herself to the fact that Asia has the same material and moral claims upon her that Europe often asserts she herself has upon the United States. If Europe considers she has rights vis-à-vis the New World whose civilization comes from hers, she should never forget that those rights can only be based on historical and moral foundations which create for her, in return, very heavy duties towards a world from which she herself was born.

The West, however need not fear that, in this settling of accounts with the East, the latter alone will be the receiver. Preoccupied as it has been, and for too long, with the economic aspect of the relations between the two worlds, the West has possibly overlooked a number of lessons it can learn from Asia, and which it is not too late to ask now.

## Body and Spirit

Despite the interest evinced by scholars and the remarkable work accomplished by Orientalists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the mind of the West has not, as a whole, been very open to the messages of Asiatic thought; it seemed difficult to comprehend when attempts were made to introduce it to groups of peoples who lacked the basic experience underlying it.

All Western civilization has tended to separate corporeal from spiritual activities as completely as possible, or rather to treat them as two uncommunicating worlds. This is reflected in its philosophical, moral and religious ideas, and in the forms taken by its techniques and everyday life. Only recently, with the development of psychiatry, analysis and psycho-somatic medicine, has the West really begun to grasp the inseparability of the two worlds. This key, which is new to it and



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**The central mosque in Ipswich (United Kingdom), located next to the Catholic Church of St Pancras, was built in 1970 for the local Bangladeshi community.**

which it handles so clumsily, Asia has long known how to use – for purposes, it is true, which are not exactly the same. For the West, which for three centuries has concentrated mainly on developing mechanical processes, has forgotten (or rather has never tried to develop) those processes of the body which can produce in that instrument – the only natural and also the most universal one at man's disposal – effects whose diversity and accuracy are generally unknown.

This rediscovery of man's body, in which Asia could be a guide to humanity, would also be a rediscovery of his mind, since it would (as in Yoga and other similar systems) bring to light a network of actions and symbols, mental experiments and physical process which unless they were known, would probably prevent the psychological and philosophical thought of the East from being, for the West, anything more than a series of empty formulae.

This keen feeling, found in Asia, of the interdependence of aspects of life which elsewhere one tried to isolate and close off from each other, of the compatibility of values sometimes considered to be incompatible, is also found in the sphere of political and social thought. The first illustration of this is in the field of religion. From Buddhism to Islam, proceeding by way of the various forms of Hinduism, the religions of South Asia have shown that they were supreme in the art of living together, comprehendingly, with other very different forms of belief.

## When Moslems controlled pork markets...

In East Bengal, not far from the frontier of Burma, we have seen side by side, mosques bereft of images, Hindu temples with families of idols each of which enshrined a god, and Buddhist pagodas filled with images (simple objects for contemplation) • • •



• • • of a single sage superior to gods and men. These irreconcilable yet at the same time definitely complementary forms of human faith could co-exist peaceably, to such an extent that Moslem authorities supervised markets where the only meat displayed was pork (the staple food of the Mongol peasants in the hinterland of Chittagong), and young Buddhists, under the amused eyes of their bonzes, helped enthusiastically to drag the goddess Kali's chariot to the river, on the occasion of the Hindu festival.

It would be easy to set against this idyllic picture the burnings and massacres that marked the separation of Pakistan from India. But in the case of these universal after-effects of nationalist poison,

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is it not the West that bears the primary responsibility? The only attempts South Asia made in the way of political unification – before Europe compelled it to think in European terms – developed in quite a different atmos-

phere. From the time of Asoka – of whom the Director General of UNESCO, in his speech to the Indian National Commission, said that he “attained to the concept of a universal committee seeking the good of all created things”- to that of Gandhi, the ideal always sought was that of peaceful brotherhood. This ideal is particularly evident in the political and aesthetic achievements of the Emperor Akbar, whose ruined palaces – a combination of Persian, Hindu and even European styles side by side – affirm the will, and the possibility that different races, beliefs and civilizations should live together in harmony. ▲

continue from page 11

• • • Following a world slump in demand, pearl button production in the villages has declined from 60,000 gross per week to less than 50,000 per month while the price paid to the village craftsman has fallen 75 per cent.

This is only one example of the distressing problems facing Pakistan today. It would be a mistake, however, to view them merely as economic problems. No doubt the key to the dilemma lies first with the technicians.

For example, the material conditions of the Bengali peasant could almost be unbelievably

improved by the introduction of small specially manufactured, hand operated machines. These would simplify the different stages of work in the button industry. But who better than UNESCO can draw the attention of scientists and technicians to the fact (which they so often tend to overlook) that the purposes of science are not only to solve scientific problems but to find answers to social problems as well. The efforts of science should not only enable mankind to surpass itself; they must also help those who lag behind to catch up.

A young nation founded on an ancient civilization, Pakistan like other nations of Asia or America,

synthesizes in its problems the whole of human development. At one and the same time, it suffers and lives in our Middle Ages which its villages perpetuate; in our 18th and 19th centuries which its first attempts at industrialization reproduce; in our 20th century whose advantages it is determined to secure. Perhaps the more developed nations, by providing Pakistan with some of the means to bridge these gaps and overcome such contradictions, may learn in return how man can succeed in attaining his full individual stature without denying any part of his heritage and of his past. ▲



# “PRIMITIVES”?

The term implies the idea of a beginning. It refers to people who live as they did at the dawn of human history? A tempting hypothesis, but one that leads to serious misunderstandings, says Lévi-Strauss, explaining in this May 1954 *Courier* article why the notion of primitive society is an illusion.

Claude Lévi-Strauss

There was a time when if you spoke about savages everyone had a fairly clear idea what you were talking about. Etymologically, the savage was a man of the forest, and the term denoted those people who lived in close contact with nature. The German *naturvölker* (nature folk) conveyed this idea directly.

But apart from the fact that all savages do not necessarily live in forests (think of the Eskimos), the word soon took on a figurative meaning which quickly became derogatory. Then too, the idea of living in close contact with nature is ambiguous; farmers live in much closer proximity with nature than city dwellers yet both belong to the same civilization.

Scientists came to realize that you could not classify the people of the world according to how close or how far removed they were from nature. In fact what distinguishes mankind from the animals is that man, with his universal use of language, his fabricated implements and tools, and his submission to customs, creeds and institutions, belongs to a higher order than any living thing in nature. The world of man is a world of culture that is rigorously and unequivocally opposed to nature whatever the level of civi-



© Edouard Duval-Carrié  
“La destruction des Indes”; part of the triptych  
by Haitian artist Edouard Duval-Carrié (Private collection).

lization. Every human being talks, makes implements and behaves according to set rules whether he lives in a skyscraper or in a thatched hut in the middle of the forest. And it is this that makes him a human being, not the particular materials he builds his house out of.

Modern anthropology prefers therefore to use the word primitive to designate the people who used to be called savage. There are an enormous number of primitive societies – several thousands according to a recent estimate. But trouble starts when an effort is made to describe the characteristics of such societies.

## What common denominator?

First of all, we can discount the factor of numbers, which is the size of the society. Of course, size does have meaning from the global point of view, for societies comprising several million members appear only rarely in the history of mankind and are found only in a few great civilizations. Moreover, these civilizations appeared at different historical epochs and in regions as far apart as the East and Far East, Europe, Central and South America. Yet below this level there are differences so great that the factor of numbers or size can have . . .

• • • no absolute value. Some African kingdoms included several hundred thousand members, Oceanian tribes several thousand, but in the same regions of the world we find societies made up of a few hundred persons or even at times of only a few dozen.

In addition, such peoples (for instance, the Eskimos and some Australians tribes) are often organized in an extraordinarily flexible way: a group is able to expand on festive occasions or during certain periods of the year, so as to include several thousand persons, while at other seasons it splits up into small self-sufficient bands of a few families, or even of single families. Obviously if a society consisting of 40 members and another of 40,000 can both be called primitive for the same reasons, the numerical factor alone doesn't provide an explanation.

## Cultures existing outside industrial civilization

We may perhaps be on firmer ground if we consider another feature, undeniably present in every culture we call primitive: each of them is, or was at least until very recently, outside the range of industrial civilization. But here again, the yardstick will not work. Consider the case of Western Europe. It has often been stated, and rightly, that the way of life in

western Europeans scarcely changed from the beginning of historic times until the invention of the steam-engine; there was no fundamental difference between the life of a patrician in Imperial Rome and that of a well-to-do Frenchman, Englishman or Dutchman of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



© Claude Lévi-Strauss  
**Nambikwara child with labret and nose piercing (Brazil, 1935-1939).**

Moreover, neither Rome in the second century B.C. nor Amsterdam about 1750 is comparable with a Melanesian village of today or with Timbuktu in the middle of the 19th century. Civilizations which *preceded* the birth of our industrial civilization should not be confused with those which existed outside it, and would probably have remained outside for a very long time if industrialization had not been imposed upon them.

The fact is that when we speak of primitive peoples, we have the factor of history (or time) in mind. The very word primitive implies the idea of a beginning. Then can we say that primitive peoples are those which have retained or preserved to the present day a way of

life that goes back to the beginnings of human society? This is an attractive hypothesis and it is valid within certain limits. But it is also liable to cause serious confusion.

First, we know absolutely nothing about mankind's actual beginnings. The earliest traces we have discovered – arms and implements in chipped stone some thousands of centuries old – are certainly not the very first products of the human brain. They already reveal complicated technical skills which must have developed little by little. And above all, these techniques are found to be the same over vast stretches of the earth's surface implying therefore that they had time to spread, to influence one another, and to become homogeneous.

In the second place, the peoples whom we call primitive are all- or nearly all- familiar with at least some of the arts and techniques that appeared extremely late in the development of the civilization. Although the oldest chipped stone implements may date from 400,000 or 500,000 years ago, agriculture, stock raising, weaving and pottery appeared only about ten thousand years ago, perhaps less. Thus the "primitiveness" of peoples who cultivate gardens, breed pigs, weave loin cloths and make cooking-pots is quite relative in the time span of the total duration of human history. • • •

••• But we can ask another question: after all, do not at least some of these peoples continue to follow a way of life much older than ours, much more like that of man in the earliest ages? At once, some examples come to mind: the aborigines of Australia or of South America. They lead a nomadic life in semi-arid regions, live by hunting, and by picking and gathering from the earth what food they can. They are ignorant of weaving or pottery, and until quite recently used stone implements.

The natives of Australia had no knowledge even of the bow and arrow, while those of Tierra del Fuego had only a very rudimentary type.

## People without history?

Nevertheless, the progress of ethnological knowledge provides the explanation. It has shown that in these cases and in all the others that could be mentioned; the apparently primitive state is not the result of any miraculous preservation of an ancient mode of life, it is the effect of regression. The Australians can only have reached their continent by boat, so they must at some time have known the art of navigation, and since forgotten it.



© Claude Lévi-Strauss

**Nambikwara man with feather nose pin (Brazil, 1935-1939).**

A change of environment to an area which lacks good quality clay often explains the disappearance of pottery sometimes even from human memory. Language often proves that peoples, whose low level of civilization might suggest

their immobilization and isolation in the same place from the most distant times, have in fact been in contact for thousands of years with all kinds of much more highly developed populations. Far from these alleged primitives having no history, it is their history that explains the very special conditions in which they have been found.

For it would be absurd to think that, because we know nothing or almost nothing of their past, primitive peoples have no history. Their remo-

test ancestors appeared on the earth at the same time as our own. For tens and even hundreds of thousands of years, other societies preceded theirs and throughout that time lived, endured and therefore changed as ours did. They knew wars, migrations, periods of want and prosperity. They had great men who left their stamp on technical knowledge, on art, morals and religion. All this past exists; only they know little about it and we know nothing.

The latent presence and pressure of a past that has disappeared are enough to show the falsity of the word primitive, and even of the idea of a primitive people. But at the same time we must take note of a feature which all societies have in common and which

*“All these societies –from the powerful empire of the Incas [...] down to the small nomadic bands of plant-gatherers in Australia- are comparable in at least one respect: they knew or still know nothing of writing. [...] Although these societies are not, strictly speaking, more “primitive” than ours, their past is of a different kind. [...] It was a fluid past which could be preserved only in small quantities, and the remainder, as it came into existence, was condemned to be forgotten with no hope of recovery.”*



••• distinguishes them from ours. It is the reason for applying to them all the same term, however inappropriate it may be.

## Primitive – a misleading term

All these societies –from the powerful empire of the Incas, which succeeded in organizing several million men into a politico-economic system of exceptional efficiency, down to the small nomadic bands of plant-gatherers in Australia– are comparable in at least one respect: they knew or still know nothing of writing.

They could preserve nothing of their past save what human memory was able to retain. This remains true, even for the small number who have, for lack of writing, developed some systems of mnemonics (such as the Peruvian knotted strings or the graphic symbols of Easter Island and of certain African tribes). Although these societies are not, strictly speaking, more “primitive” than ours, their past is of a different kind. It could not be a past preserved in writing and thus available at any moment to be used for present advantage.

It was a fluid past which could be preserved only in small quantities, and the remainder, as it came into existence, was condemned to be forgotten with no hope of recovery.

To borrow a simile from the language of navigation, societies with some form of writing have a



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**Nambikwara woman with small Capuchin monkey on her head (Brazil, 1935-1939).**

means of logging their course and therefore of keeping on the same track for a long period. On the other hand, societies without some form of writing are reduced to following an unsteady course, which may in the end (although the distance covered in the same in both cases) bring them back very near to their starting point. Or at least it deprived them of the means of systematically drawing away from it, that is to say, of making progress.

Therefore I cannot too strongly warn that readers – and even scientists themselves- should beware of ambiguous terms like savage, primitive or archaic. By taking the presence or absence of some form of writing as the sole criterion in our study of our societies, we shall, in the first place, be invoking an objective quality which implies no philosophic or moral postulate. And at the same time we shall

be relying on the only feature capable of explaining the real difference that distinguishes certain societies from our own.

The idea of a *primitive society* is a delusion. On the other hand the idea of a *society with no form of writing* makes us aware of an essential side of mankind’s development; it explains the history and enables us to foresee and perhaps influence the future of these peoples. ▲



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**Undeciphered ideograms of the Rapa Nui language, now extinct (Easter Island).**



# HUMAN MATHEMATICS

Human mathematics will escape the despair of “great numbers” – the raft to which the social sciences, lost in an ocean of figures, have been helplessly clinging, says Lévi-Strauss in an article published in the *Social Science Bulletin* in 1954, which recommends co-ordinating methods of thought. Excerpts

## Claude Lévi-Strauss

Excerpts from the “Introduction” to the *International Social Science Bulletin*, Vol. VI, n° 4, 1954



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Claude Lévi-Strauss and the monkey Lucinda, his travel companion in Brazil (1935-1939).

When we consider the history of science, it looks as if man realized, at a very early stage, what his programme of research was to be and then, once having decided on it, took hundreds of years to acquire the means of carrying it out. In the earliest days of scientific thought, the Greek philosophers stated the problems of physics in terms of the atom, and now, two thousand five hundred years later – in a way that they probably never guessed – we are just beginning to fill in the framework which they outlined so long ago. The same might be said of the application of mathematics to the problems of mankind, for the speculations of the earliest geometers and arithmeticians were concerned with man far more than with the physical world. Pythagoras was deeply interested in the anthropological significance of numbers and figures, and Plato was much taken up with similar considerations.

In the last ten years or so these ideas, which were of such interest to the ancient world, have once more become matters of immediate practical concern; for it should be noted immediately that the developments to which this number of the *International Social Science Bulletin* hopes to make a modest contribution are by no means confined to the social sciences. They are also to be seen in the so-called sciences of man (if a distinction can in fact be made between the two groups). I would go even further, and say that the most sensational developments were perhaps first seen in the sciences of man – possibly because, at first sight, those sciences seem the most remote from any idea of exactitude and measurement, but also, in all probability, because the essentially qualitative object of their study made it impossible for them to ‘tag along’ behind traditional mathematics, as the social sciences have done for so long, and forced them to turn, from the

outset, to certain novel and daring forms of mathematical thought. [...]

The criticism to which the experimental psychologists of the beginning of this century, and the traditional economists and demographers, are open is certainly not that they have paid too much attention to mathematics, but rather that they have not paid enough; that they have simply borrowed quantitative methods which, even in mathematics itself, are regarded as traditional and largely outmoded, and have not realized that a new school of mathematics is coming into being and is indeed expanding enormously at the present time – a school of what might almost be called qualitative mathematics, paradoxical as the term may seem because a rigorous treatment no longer necessarily means recourse to measurement. This new mathematics (which incidentally simply gives backing to, and

• • • expands on, earlier speculative thought) teaches us that the domain of necessity is not necessarily the same as that of quantity.

## Neither addition, nor multiplication, marriage can be expressed as equations

This distinction became clear to the present writer in circumstances which it may perhaps be permissible to recall in this context. When, about 1944, he gradually became convinced that the rules of marriage and descent were not fundamentally different, as rules of communication, from those prevailing in linguistics, and that it should therefore be possible to give a rigorous treatment of them, the established mathematicians whom he first approached treated him with scorn. Marriage, they told him, could not be assimilated either to addition or to multiplication (still less to subtraction or division), and it was therefore impossible to express it in mathematical terms.

This went until the day when one of the young leaders of the new school, having considered the problem, explained that, in order to develop a theory of the rules of marriage, the mathematician had absolutely no need to reduce marriage to quantitative terms; in fact, he did not even need to know what marriage was. All he

asked was, firstly, that it should be possible to reduce the marriages observed in any particular society to a finite number of categories and, secondly, that there should be definite relationships between the various categories (e.g. that there should always be the same relationship between the “category” of the parents’ marriage and “category” of the children’s). From then on, all the rules of marriage in a given society can be expressed as equations and these equations can be treated by tested and reliable methods of reasoning, while the intrinsic nature of the phenomenon studied – marriage – has nothing to do with the problem and can indeed remain completely unknown.

## Small numbers, big changes

Brief and simple as this example is, it is a good illustration of the

direction now likely to be followed in collaboration between mathematics and the sciences of man. In the past, the great difficulty has arisen from the qualitative nature of our studies. If they were to be treated quantitatively, it was either necessary to do a certain amount of juggling with them or to simplify to an excessive degree. Today, however, there are many branches of mathematics – set theory, group theory, topology, etc. – which are concerned with establishing exact relationships between classes of individuals distinguished from one another by discontinuous values, and this very discontinuity is one of the essential characteristics of qualitative sets in relation to one another and was the feature, in which their alleged “incommensurability”, “inexpressibility”, etc., consisted.

This mathematics of man – to be discovered along lines that neither mathematicians nor sociologists have as yet been able to determine exactly, and which is, no doubt, still to be elaborated to a very large extent – will, in any event, be very different from the mathematics which the social sciences once sought to use in order to express their observations in precise terms.

It is resolutely determined to break away from the hopelessness of the “great numbers” – the raft to which the social sciences, lost in an ocean of figures,

• • •



© Claude Lévi-Strauss  
Drawing from Claude Lévi-Strauss's travel notebook (Brazil, 1935-1939).

• • • have been helplessly clinging; its ultimate object is no longer to plot progressive and continuous movements in monotonous graphs. The field with which it is concerned is not that of the infinitesimal variations revealed by the analysis of vast accumulations of data. The pictures it gives is, rather, that resulting from the study of small numbers and of the great changes brought about by the transition from one number to another. If the example is permissible, I would say that we are less concerned with the theoretical consequences of a 10 percent increase in the population in a country having 50 million inhabitants than with the changes in structure occurring when a “two-person household” becomes a “three-person household”.

Study of the possibilities and limitations connected with the number of members of very small groups (which, from this point of view, remain “very small” even if the members themselves are groups of millions of individuals

*“UNESCO would render the social sciences an incalculable service if it concentrated on working out a sort of theoretical model course in social science, that would strike a proper balance between the traditional contribution of those sciences and the revolutionary new offerings of mathematical research and culture.”*



© Claude Lévi-Strauss  
Nambikwara family (Brazil, 1935-1939).

each) no doubt carries on a very old tradition, for the earliest Greek philosophers, the sages of China and India, and the thinkers of the peoples who lived in Africa and America before colonial times and before Columbus were all much concerned with the significance and peculiar properties of numbers. The Indo-European civilization, for instance, had a predilection for the figure “three”, while the African and definite logical and mathematical implications.[...]

### Think both mathematically and sociologically

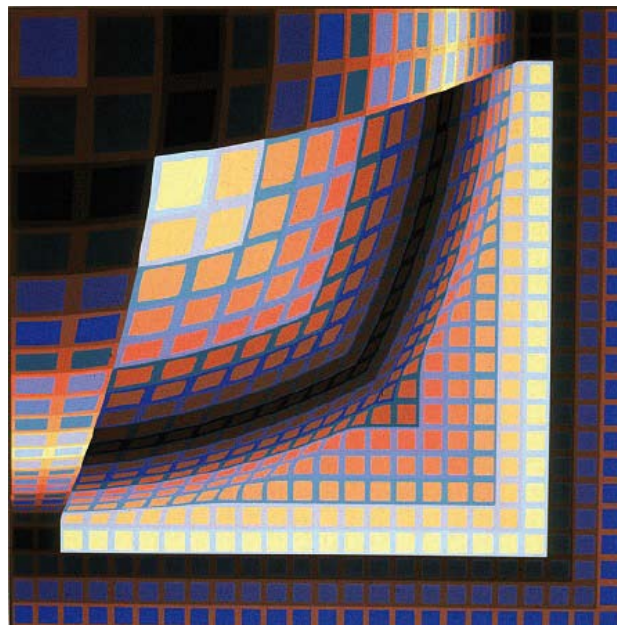
The enormous majority of social scientists have, even now, had a classical or empirical training. Very few of them have mathematical background and, even if they have, it is often very elementary and very conservative. The new

openings offered to the social sciences by certain aspects of contemporary mathematical thinking will therefore call for a considerable effort of adaptation on the part of the social scientists. A good example of what can be done in this direction was recently set by Social Science Research Council of the United States of America, which, during the summer of 1953, organized a mathematics seminar for social scientists at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. Six mathematicians gave an eight-weeks course for 42 persons on the principles of the set theory, the group theory and the calculus of probabilities.

It is to be hoped that experiments of this sort will be made more often and more generally. [...] From this point of view, UNESCO has a very important duty to perform. The need for a revision of syllabuses



... is felt in all countries; but the teachers and administrators, most of whom have had a traditional training, are intellectually ill-equipped to plan and carry out such a revision. International action by the very few specialists throughout the world who are now able to think both mathematically and sociologically, in terms of the new situation, therefore seems particularly desirable. UNESCO would render the social sciences an incalculable service if it concentrated on working out a sort of theoretical model course in social science (which could subsequently be adapted to suit local circumstances), that would strike a proper balance between the traditional contribution of those sciences



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Vasarely lithograph.

and the revolutionary new offerings of mathematical research and culture.

It would, however, be wrong to suppose that the whole problem consists simply in reorganizing instruction, so as to enable social scientists to take advantage of the latest advances in mathematical thought. It is not simply, nor indeed mainly a question of taking over methods and results from the mathematics wholesale. The special needs of the social sciences, and the distinctive features of the subject of their study necessitate a special effort of adaptation and invention on the part of mathematicians.

### Co-ordination of methods of thought

One-way collaboration is not enough. On the one hand, mathematics will help the advance of the social sciences but, on the other, the special

requirements of those sciences will open up new possibilities for mathematics. Viewed in this light, a new form of mathematics therefore has to be developed. This cross-fertilization has, for the past two years, been the main object of the Seminar on the Use of Mathematics in the Human and Social Sciences, organized at UNESCO House in 1953 and 1954 under the auspices of the International Social Science Council, in which mathematicians, physicists and biologists (on the natural science side) and economists, sociologists, historians, linguists, anthropologists and psycho-analysis (on the human and social science side) have taken part. It is still too early to assess the results of this daring experiment; but whatever shortcomings it may have had – which are only to be expected in this period of trial and error – all involved in it are unanimous in stating that they gained much from the seminar.

For man suffers quite as much, in his inner life, from “intellectual watertight compartments” as he does, in his community life, from the distrust and hostility between different groups. By working for the co-ordination of methods of thought, which cannot for ever remain entirely unrelated in the various spheres of knowledge, we are helping in the quest for an inner harmony which may be, on a different level from that with which UNESCO is concerned but no less truly, the real condition for wisdom and peace. ▲



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Cover of Greek translation of *Race and History and Race and Culture* by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

# HOW THE SOCIAL SCIENCES HAVE HUMANISED TECHNICAL CIVILISATION

Contrary to what one might believe, the mathematization of social sciences is not at all accompanied by dehumanization, as Claude Lévi-Strauss declared in this archive document, dated 8 August 1956. Technological civilization is not a separate civilization. Humanization is based on all humans and all the sciences.

**Claude Lévi-Strauss**

The problem raised here does not in any way imply the recognition that social sciences are a field of their own, nor that they are defined by special characteristics. Do social sciences deserve a separate place, next to the humanities on one hand, and to natural sciences on the other? Do they offer any real originality, other than – as has amusingly been said – of not being more social than the others, and much less scientific?

Even in the United States, where the tripartite division between human sciences, social sciences and natural sciences seemed to have been solidly established for half a century, new categories are appearing. Thus, *behavioral sciences* bring together the three orders to the extent that they directly interest humans. And yet, the best French translation of “behavioral sciences” is *sciences de la conduite humaine*, that is to say that there is a return to the bipartite distinction, which has been traditional in Europe since the Renaissance: on the one hand,



© Claude Lévi-Strauss  
**Claude Lévi-Strauss with Paulo Duarte and his wife Juanita, in New York during the Second World War.**

natural sciences, which deal with the objective world; on the other, the humanities, which deal with humans and the world in relation to them.

These methodological problems have an immediate importance for our debate: if social sciences must be considered as separate sciences, their contribution to the humanization of civilization is not at all obvious; it needs to be demonstrated. If, on the other hand, social sciences are not different from the research traditio-

nally carried out in the name of human sciences, if, therefore, they are within the field of the humanities, it is self-evident that any thinking about humans is “humanising” just because it is “human”. According to one conception or the other, their contribution to progress will also seem different. In the first hypothesis, this contribution will be conceived using the engineer’s model: study a problem, determine the difficulties and devise a solution using the appropriate techniques: social order is considered as an objective datum, which only needs to be improved. On

the contrary, in the second case the stress is placed on becoming aware: just the fact of judging an order bad or imperfect humanizes it, as the emergence of a criticism is already a change.

What is therefore the common characteristic in research that is classified under the name of social sciences? They are all linked to society, and to the improvement of the knowledge of society; but not for the same reasons. Sometimes, they are . . .

• • • problems whose characteristics are so unique that one chooses to isolate them from the others, in order to solve them better: such is the case of law, political science and economic science. Sometimes, one intends to study phenomena common to all forms of social life, but by reaching them at a deeper level: this is the ambition shared by sociology and social psychology. Finally, one sometimes wants to include in the knowledge of humans types of activities that are *very remote*, in time or in space, and this research falls within the field of history and ethnology. Uniqueness, depth, remoteness: three forms of resistance of social facts, that the corresponding disciplines attempt to overcome in parallel, but using different means.

The three forms do not have the same basis; it is a fact that several centuries separate us from the Middle Ages, and several thousand kilometres from Melanesian societies; on the contrary, it is a convention that political or economic systems are sufficiently isolated from the rest to justify separate disciplines. It has legitimately been possible to claim that this arbitrary division of social phenomena leads to dehumanization, and in several ways.

## Social sciences: a gratuitous manipulation of symbols?

One may first wonder if all social phenomena benefit from the same



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Symbolic Bororo bow brought back by Claude Lévi-Strauss from Brazil (height 175 cm).

degree of reality, and if some of them (those that are being covered here) are not an illusion, a sort of collective phantasmagoria. The problem is then to know if certain levels can be isolated,

or if they do not depend on other levels with which they maintain dialectical relationships. Finally, science always postulates the coherence of its object; if the social sciences at issue are defined by reference to a pseudo-object, do they not merely consist in a sort of game, a gratuitous manipulation of symbols? We would then be in the area of mystification, which is quite the contrary of humanization.

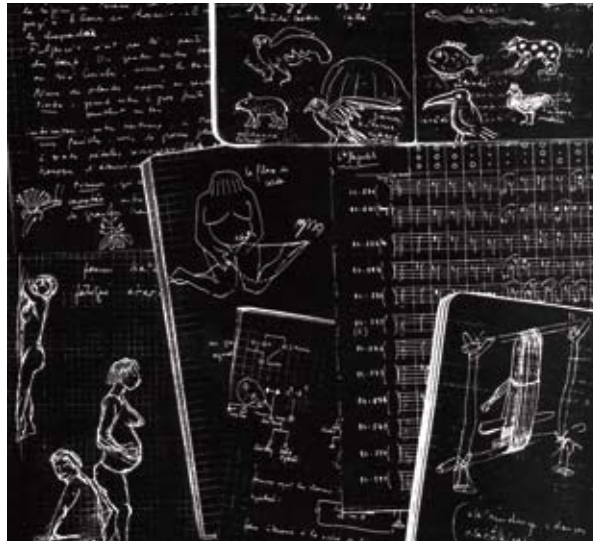
And yet, mystification is also a human operation. Whatever the degree of reality that we recognize in legal or political systems, and whatever the objective function they perform in the life of societies, these systems are productions of the mind. By studying their structures and the mechanism of their functioning, and by establishing their typology, we learn at least something, namely how the human spirit works to give a rational form (be it only in appearance) to what has none. On the condition that the corresponding sciences are really sciences (that is to say that they are carried out in true objectivity), the knowledge that they gather is humanising, for they allow humans to become aware of the real functioning of society.

The case of economic science is especially significant, as, in its liberal form, it has been accused of manipulating abstractions. But in social sciences, as elsewhere, abstraction may be understood in two ways. Too often, it is used as pretext for an arbitrary division • • •



• • • of concrete reality. Economic science has been a victim of this error in the past. On the other hand, the recent attempts to apply modern mathematics (called “qualitative”) to economic theory, have led to a remarkable result: the more the theory became mathematic and therefore – seemingly – abstract, the more it implied historical and concrete objects at the outset, as the substance of its formalism. No form of economic bourgeois thought is closer to Marxist conceptions than the highly mathematic treatment presented by von Neumann and Morgenstern in 1944 in the *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour*: for them, the theory is applied to a society divided into rival groups and between which antagonisms or coalitions are created. Contrary to what one might believe, the mathematization of social sciences is not at all accompanied by dehumanization. It corresponds to the fact that inside each discipline, theory tends to become more and more general. In mathematical expression, economic science, sociology and psychology discover a common language. And it may be very rapidly seen that this common language is possible, because the objects to which it is applied are, in reality, identical.

The same “humanist” connection occurs in psychology and sociology. Thus, by studying the mechanisms of subconscious life, psychoanalysts make use of a



© Claude Lévi-Strauss  
**Drawing from Claude Lévi-Strauss's travel notebook (Brazil, 1935-1939).**

symbolism that is in fact the same one as that that used by social psychologists and linguists, to the extent that language and social stereotypes are also based on subconscious activities of the mind.

It is worth focusing on this convergence of social sciences for a moment. Our sciences first became isolated in order to become deeper, but at a certain depth, they succeed in joining each other. Thus, little by little, in an objective area, the old phi-

*“Always below and beyond social sciences, ethnology can neither be dissociated from natural sciences nor from human sciences. Its originality consists in the union of the methods of both, at the service of a generalized knowledge of humans, that is to say anthropology.”*

losophical hypothesis of *the unity of the human spirit*, or more exactly, of the universal existence of a *human nature* is borne out. No matter from which angle it is approached, either individual or collective, in its expressions that are apparently the least controlled, or perceived through traditional institutions, we see that the human spirit obeys the same laws, always and everywhere.

## The third wave

Ethnology and history put us in the presence of an evolution of the same type. It was long believed that history only aimed at exactly recreating the past. In fact, history, as well as ethnology, studies societies that are *different* from those in which we live. They both seek to widen specific experience to the dimensions of an experience that is general, or more general, which thus becomes more accessible to humans of another country or of another time.

Like history, ethnology is therefore part of the humanist tradition. But its role is to create, for the first time, what might be called *democratic humanism*. After the aristocratic humanism of the Renaissance, founded only on the comparison of Greek and Roman societies (because no others were known) and the exotic humanism of the 19th century, which added to them the civilizations of the East and Far East (but only through written documents and figurative monuments), ethnology appears as the third wave – • • •

••• no doubt the last – because, of all social sciences, it is the most characteristic of the finite world that our planet has become in the 20th century. Ethnology appeals to all human societies, in order to draw up a global knowledge of humans; and, even better, the distinctive characteristics of these “residual” societies have led it to create new types of knowledge, which, as we are gradually realizing, can profitably be applied to the study of all civilizations, including ours. It operates simultaneously on the surface and in depth.

## Technological civilization is not a separate civilization

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In the absence of written texts and figurative monuments, these ways of knowledge are both more external and more internal (one might also say coarser and finer) than those of the other social sciences: on the one hand, study from the outside (physical anthropology, prehistory, technology), on the other hand, study from the inside (identification of ethnology with the group whose existence it shares). Always *below* and *beyond* social sciences, ethnology can neither be dissociated from natural sciences nor from human sciences. Its originality consists in the union of the methods of both, at the service of a *generalized knowledge of humans*, that is to say *anthropology*.



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**Bororo head band, brought back by Claude Lévi-Strauss from Brazil.**

With the risk of belying the title of this lecture, it is therefore not by declaring themselves social and isolating themselves from the rest that our disciplines will be able to humanize civilization, but by quite simply attempting to become more

special techniques for its improvement: the humanization of social life is not the task of one profession. It depends on all humans and on all sciences.

Humanizing technological civilization is, first, to put it into perspective in the global history of humanity, and then to analyse and understand the driving forces of its advent and functioning. In every case, as a result: to know. The contribution of our sciences will be evaluated, not using dubious methods that are subject to the whims of the day, but according to the new perspectives that they will be able to open to humanity, so that



© Claude Lévi-Strauss

**Claude Lévi-Strauss in Amazonia with his travel companion, Lucinda the monkey, at his feet (Brazil, 1935-1939).**

scientific. Technological civilization is not a separate civilization, which requires the invention of

it may better understand its own nature and its history, and therefore also judge it. ▲

# GIVING : MAKING A WISH

Imagine Caligula in the vestibule of his palace waiting for his presents. Or Queen Elizabeth I jumping for joy at receiving silk stockings and garters from her lords. Citing anecdotes, Lévi-Strauss traces the origins of gift-giving and examines its social role, in the August-September 1955 *Courier*.

## Claude Lévi-Strauss

The custom of making New Year gifts has both a simple and complicated history. It is simple enough if we merely think of the general meaning of the custom itself, and examine the example, Japan's New Year wish, "*O-ni wa soto fuku wa uchi!*" (Out, all demons! Let good luck come in!) Just as the old year should take the ill luck away with it, so the enrichment and happiness brought by the exchange of gifts on New Year's Day are regarded as an omen, almost as a magic spell, to ensure that the New Year will continue as joyfully as it began.

From this point of view, the Japanese saying is very like those used by Ovid in the first book of the *Fastes*, describing Romans customs at the festival of Janus. Today, this has become our January 1, although for a long time, even in Rome, the festival did not coincide with the beginning of New Year. "What is the meaning",

the poet asks Janus, "of the dates, the wrinkled figs and the light-coloured honey, offered in a white vessel?" "It is an omen," replies the god. "They express the desire that coming events may impregnate with the same sweetness..." Ovid also relates that on the first day of the year, the Roman shopkeepers were careful to open their shops for a short while, in order to make a few sales as a good omen for the rest of the year. Curiously enough, this tradition has been



© Claude Lévi-Strauss  
Munde tribespeople around the gifts received from members of the Claude Lévi-Strauss expedition in Brazil (1935-1939).



© Atlantique Japon  
Slips of paper marked with celestial predictions that are drawn on the 1st of January in Japan.

kept up in the French language, in which the word for the New Year gifts is *étrennes*. Shopkeepers reverse the meaning in the use of the verb *étrenner*, which signifies to make the first sale of the day.

It is more difficult to trace the origin of the custom of New Year gifts in the Western world. The ancient Celts Druids had a ceremony which corresponds to January 1. They cut mistletoe, which was considered to be a magical plant with protective powers from the oak trees, and distributed it to the people. Hence the name given in certain parts of France, until quite recently, to New Year gifts: *guy-l'an-neuf*, corrupted sometimes into *aguignette* (from the French *gui*: "mistletoe" and *l'an-neuf*: "New Year").

In Rome during the second half of December and the early part of January, festivals took place



••• at which gifts were exchanged; those offered in December were usually of two kinds – wax candles (which we have adopted for our Christmas trees) and dolls made of clay or some edible substance, which were given to the children. There were others, too, described in great detail by Martial in his epigrams; Roman chroniclers related that the patricians received gifts from their plebeian dependents and the Emperors from the citizens. Caligula took possession of his gifts in person and spent the whole day in the vestibule of his palace for this purpose.

## Pocket money for Elizabeth I

Traces of their dual origin – in pagan customs and Roman rites – seem long to have been preserved by New Year gifts. Why otherwise would the Church throughout the Middle-Ages have tried – in vain – to abolish them as barbaric survival? However, by then, these gifts were not only periodical tribute paid by the peasants to their overlord, in the form of capons, fresh cheeses and preserved fruits; or symbolic offerings, such as oranges or lemons, spiked with cloves, hung like charms above jars of wine to prevent it from turning sour, or nutmegs wrapped up in gilt paper. They were part of a much larger scheme of offerings under which, in certain parts of Europe, even the livestock were



© Danny Machalini  
Women bearing gifts.

beneficiaries, being gratified with juniper fumes and sprinkled with urine.

New Year gifts, as we know them today, are not so much a relic of these popular customs as the democratization of an aristocratic tradition. Very early in modern history sovereigns demanded New Year gifts as a means of augmenting their income and affording a further opportunity for their subjects to prove their loyalty. In France, Henry III and the Duc de Berri were in the habit of receiving New Year gifts (what we would nowadays call a “luxury edition” is mentioned under this heading in the inventory of the latter’s possessions). It is well known that Elizabeth I of England relied on her New Year gifts for her pocket money and the upkeep of her wardrobe; the archbishops and bishops each used to give her from ten to forty pounds, while she received dresses, skirts, silk stockings, garters, cloaks, mantle

and furs from her noblemen and such presents as precious caskets, pots of ginger, orange-flower and other confections from her doctors and her apothecaries.

During the European Renaissance, metal pins became a favourite form of present as they were then a great novelty; until the 15th century, women had used wooden pins to fasten their clothing. As for New Year cards with pictures and ornamental texts, they are known to have been in use from Europe to Japan. “Some in golden letters write their love” says a 17th century English poet. In France, illustrated New Year cards were in fashion until the revolution.

## Spontaneous acceptance of interdependence

To understand why the practice of exchanging New Year gifts is so persistent and so widespread, we must look beyond these entertaining details for the underlying significance of the custom. “The manner of giving is more important than the gift”, the saying goes, and all peoples, “savage” or civilized, appear to believe that it is better to receive objects as presents than to acquire them oneself, as if the act of giving – or receiving – has added to the value of the object. The Maoris of New Zealand believed that a magic power, which they called “hau”, entered into the present and created a permanent link between the giver and the receiver. Similarly, the Roman custom of offering

•••  
continue on page 38

# WITCH-DOCTORS AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

While in Europe the mentally ill were shackled, some primitive societies treated them using methods much resembling psychoanalysis, explains Lévi-Strauss in the July-August 1956 *Courier* article, where he draws parallels between shamanistic rituals and modern psychotherapies.

**Claude Lévi-Strauss**

Most of us regard psychoanalysis as a revolutionary discovery of 20th century civilization and place it on the same footing as genetics or the theory of relativity. Others, probably more conscious of the abuses of psychoanalysis than of the real lesson it has to teach us, still look upon it

as one of the absurdities of modern man. In both cases, we overlook the fact that, psychoanalysis has simply rediscovered and expressed in new terms an approach to mental illness which probably dates back to the earliest days of mankind and which the so-called primitive peoples have always used, often with a skill that amazes our foremost practitioners.

A few years ago, Swedish ethnologists recorded and published a long healing ritual used among the Cuna Indians of Panama in cases of difficult childbirth. In the ritual, the tribe's witch-doctor or shaman stands before the suffering mother and begins a chant-recitation, explaining that her ailment is due to the temporary absence of the soul which controls procreation. The Cuna



© Claude Lévi-Strauss

The man, who spoke Portuguese, was an informant for Claude Lévi-Strauss among the Bororo, in Brazil (1935-1939).

Indians believe in the existence of a multitude of souls, each of which has charge of some particular functions in life. In this particular case, the soul has been kidnapped and has been carried away to the other world by some evil spirits.

The witch-doctor tells the expectant mother that he is setting out on a supernatural quest for the lost spirit. With a rare luxury of detail he describes the obstacles he meets and the enemies he has to face, how he overcomes them by force or guile before reaching the prison of the captive soul. Then he releases the soul and induces it to resume control of the suffering body lying at its side.

## Witch-doctor cures, precursors of psychoanalysis

This cure (we have no reason to suppose it is not successful at least in certain cases) is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is purely psychological; no drugs are used nor is the body of the patient touched. The witch doctor simply recites or chants, relying on

speech alone to effect his cure. Secondly, two people must participate in the treatment – doctor and patient – although, as we shall see in a moment, this does not mean that other members of the community may not be present. . . .

*In January-February 1936, Kejara included a «Men's house» and twenty-seven houses, most of them inhabited by several families. [...] Only one of the natives, who had escaped the missions, spoke Portuguese fluently. Apparently there had been a time when he had been able to read and write the language. Five or six others understood it but only possessed a vocabulary of a few words.*

• • • Of the two persons, the witch-doctor, whose powers are recognized by the whole tribe, embodies social authority and order, while the other – the patient – suffers from what we should call a physiological disorder, but which the Indians attribute to an advantage gained by the spirit world over the human world. Since these two worlds should normally be allied, and since the spirit world is of the same nature as the souls possessed by the individual, the problem as the Indians see it, really stems from a sociological disturbance caused by the ambition, ill-will or resentment of the spirits that is by both psychological and social factors.

In describing the causes of the ailment and recounting his adventures in the other world, the witch-doctor conjures up for his listeners familiar pictures drawn from the beliefs and myths which are the common heritage of the whole community. Since the cures are conducted in public, the adolescents of the tribe witness them and thus gain a detailed knowledge of the tribe's beliefs.

Several of the characteristics described are strangely reminiscent of psychoanalytical treatment. Here too, illness is considered of psychological origin and the treatment applied is exclusively psychological. Because of symptoms which he is unable to control, or more simply because

he is suffering from mental stress, the patient feels cut off from the community and calls in the doctor whose authority is recognized by the group, to help him regain his place in society. The treatment seeks to induce the patient to describe events buried in his subconscious mind but which, despite the passage of time, still govern his feelings and attitude to life.

Now there are events or stories that have their origin in so distant a past that the very recollec-



© Claude Lévi-Strauss/musée du quai Branly  
Caduveo witch-doctor's outfit. Photo taken by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the Mato Grosso, in 1935-1936.

tion of them has been lost, yet, better than more recent events, they permit us to understand the nature of thing occurring today. These stories are what sociologists call "myths", and it would be difficult to give a better definition to the word.

## Converging and diverging aspects

The main difference between the medicine man's treatment (as in the example of the pregnant mother above) and treatment by psychoanalysts is that in the first

case it is the doctor who does the talking while in the second it is the patient. A good psychoanalyst we know says hardly a word during most of the treatment; his role is to offer the patient a stimulus (one might almost say provocation) which the presence of another person provides, so that the patient can vent all his pent-up aggressive emotions on this anonymous "other person".

In both cases the creation of a myth is part of the treatment. The difference is that with the Cuna the myth is ready-made, familiar to everyone and perpetuated by tradition, the witch-doctor merely adapting it to each individual case.

In the childbirth case, for example, the witch-doctor translates the myth into terms that are meaningful to the mother. This permits her to name, then understand and perhaps

thereby dominate the anxieties which until then she had been totally incapable of expressing in any form.

In psychoanalysis, however, the patient elaborates his own myth. When we stop to think about it the difference is not so great since psychoanalysis reduces the cause of psychological disorders to a very small number of possible situations from which the patient can choose, but do little more. All of them deal with the patient's earliest experiences in life and his relationship • • •



••• with his family as a child. Here too, a state of release is reached when the anxieties which the patient could not express or dared not admit are at least translated into terms of a myth fits his particular story.



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**Caduveo Shaman apron, brought back by Claude Lévi-Strauss from the Mato Grosso (Brazil).**

To reassure psychoanalysts and their followers, let me make it clear at once that, in using the word “myth”, I am in no way implying that the story in question is either untrue or invented. Many myths are based on real occurrences but as I already have indicated, what makes a myth depends not so much on how accurately it reflects the original story or event but its capacity to give meaning to the present.

Thus it is not surprising to discover that skilled psychoanalysts who have visited primitive societies to carry out enquiries with the most up-to-date methods of investigation, have found themselves to be on a footing of equality with the medicine man, and in some cases have even acknowledged the latter’s superiority.

This was the experience of Dr Kilton Stewart, an American psychologist who has given us a delightful account of it in his book, *Pygmies and Dream Giants* [New York, 1954]. He had set off for the interior of the Philippines to study the mental make-up of the extremely primitive pygmy tribes called Negritos. His

methods closely resembled those of psychoanalysts. The witch-doctors not only allowed him to do as he wished, but immediately accepted him as one of them; in fact, regarding themselves as specialists with a thorough knowledge of the techniques employed, they insisted on helping him in his studies. Dr Stewart considers that in certain respects their psychotherapy is even ahead of ours.

I have already mentioned that the treatment administered by the shaman is given in public. Thus, all the members of the community gradually acquire the beliefs that any disorders from which they themselves may eventually suffer can be treated by the same methods they have so often seen used. Furthermore, since they know all the stages of the treatment in advance, they are all ready and willing to take part in it punctuating it with words of encouragement, helping the patient to marshal his memories, and displaying an infectious enthusiasm as the patient recovers from his disorder.

As Dr Stewart observes in this connexion, this takes us beyond psychoanalysis to one of its most recent developments, namely, group psychotherapy. One of its most familiar forms is the psychodrama in which several members of the group impersonate the characters in

the patient’s myth in order to assist him to see more clearly and thus bring the tragedy to an end. This is possible only if the patient’s myth itself is social in character. Other individuals can play a part in it because it is their own myth too, or to put it another way, because the critical situation in which individuals are liable to find themselves in our society are broadly speaking, the same for all. •••

*“In one respect, at least, the primitive system seems to be more daring and more efficacious than our own. [...] According to tribal theory, it is not enough to remove the social inferiority attributable to the illness: it must be transformed into a positive advantage, a social superiority comparable with that which we see in the creative spirit.”*

••• We thus see how deceptive to think that the forgotten events which psychoanalysts helps the patient to bring back to mind, are something private and personal. Even that difference between psychoanalysis and shamanistic treatments, thus disappears.

“As in Paris and in Vienna”, writes Dr Stewart, “the Negrito therapists were helping the patient to contact patterns and incidents from a long-forgotten past, painful incidents buried deep in the early time-layers of the accumulated experience which made up the personality.”

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## Turn mental disorder into creative talent

In one respect, at least, the primitive system seems to be more daring and more efficacious than our own. Dr Stewart describes an experience he might have had anywhere in the world, among any of the peoples we like to call primitive. When he was about to rouse a patient from the waking dream in which he was giving a haphazard account of incidents in his past life – conflict with his father transposed into myth-form of a visit to the country of the dead – his Negrito colleagues stopped him. To be definitely cured, they said, the spirit of the sickness must bestow a gift on its victim in the form of a new drum beat, a dance or a song. According to tribal theory, it is not enough to remove the social inferiority attributable to the illness: it must be transformed into a positive



© musée du quai Branly  
Kwakiutl mask, Canada (anonymous donor).

advantage, a social superiority comparable with that which we see in the creative spirit.

This connexion between an abnormal psychological balance and creative art is not of course unknown in our own theories. We have treated many geniuses, such as Gerard de Nerval, van Gogh and others, as psychotics. At best, we are sometimes prepared to pardon certain follies because they are committed by great artist. But even the poor Negritos in the jungles of Bataan are far ahead of us in this respect, for they have realized that one means of remedying a mental disorder, harmful both to the individual suffering from it and to the community which needs the healthy co-operation of all, is to transform it into a work of art. This is a method seldom used among us, though it is to it that we owe the work of such artist as Utrillo.

We have much to learn, therefore, from primitive psychiatry. Still in advance of our own psy-

chiatry in many respects, how far ahead it must have been not so long ago (traditions die so hard with us) when we knew no other means of treating mental patients than to shackle them and starve them! ▲

*“In truth, impulses and emotions explain nothing; they are always the result of either the power of the body or the impotence of the mind. Consequently, in both cases, they are never causes. These can never be located in the organism, as only biology can do, or in the intellect, which represents the only way open to psychology as well as ethnology.”*

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Totémisme aujourd’hui*, 1962.

# THESE COOKS DID NOT SPOIL THE BROTH

**Did you know that for certain peoples, eating is an indecent act? They take their food in solitary confinement. In this April 1957 Courier article, Lévi-Strauss ponders not only the social aspects of food, but also the human adventure of seeking out flavours.**

**Claude Lévi-Strauss**

If, as has been said, the art of cooking is to combine flavours of different foodstuffs so as to blend or to bring out their contrasts, the process sounds simple enough to have been discovered by any one of the world's peoples. Yet this is not the case. It is not possible to combine different ingredients unless they are easily and simultaneously to hand, nor can their flavours be mingled and harmonized without a knowledge of cooking – one that goes further than the mere heating of food.

Even the method of boiling food in an earthenware pot is not universally employed. Some peoples, who have no pottery, bring food to the boil by putting it into a vessel made of wood or bark filled with water and then dropping in heated stones. To other peoples, boiling is not known at all; they dig ovens in the ground and line them with hot stones, the food roasting slowly between layers of green leaves which give off moisture. Yet another method

*A society's cooking is a language into which it unconsciously translates its structure, unless it resigns itself, still unconsciously, to unveil its contradictions therein.*

*Claude Lévi-Strauss,  
« Le triangle culinaire », L'Arc, n°26, 1965.*



© UNESCO/ Carol Ecker  
**Selling spices at the market in Meghalaya, India (1994).**

is to use the food as its own container, by stuffing the animal's body, or flour-paste, with a mixture which cooks while this outer cover grills or roasts.

## Hot food? Horrors!

All these methods represent discoveries to which the human race

attained only gradually. Even now certain very primitive tribes, like the Nambikwara of Central Brazil, just thrust the food they kill or gather (small animals and wild root-vegetables) indiscriminately into hot embers. The ashes that stick to it provide the necessary mineral salts. This primitive cooking is fatal to the sense of taste, for the palates of the Nambikwara cannot cope with any strong stimulus; they have a horror of salt, and even of hot food; when I offered them a boiled – and boiling hot- dish, they drenched it with cold water before eating it. True this archaic attitude is exceptional. Many peoples, however, suffer not from want of cooking ability but

from a far more serious lack- that of the means of production- as a result of which they can hardly rely upon more than one type of food at a time.

## Eating one's fill

Ethnologists such as E.E. Evans-Pritchard and

• • •



• • • Audrey Richards have described how, in certain parts of Africa, the physical health and mental outlook of the native population are affected by the periodicity of foodstuffs. Many communities have enough to eat during only part of the year, when manioc, millet or rice is available. After these “fat months” come the “lean months”, when the people have only what they can collect at random. The daily meal shrinks in size and, still more important, a diet rich in carbohydrates is suddenly replaced by one consisting almost entirely of such vegetables as marrows and melons.

We, with our well-assured food-supply, can hardly imagine the intensity of the sensations resulting from this substitution. The feeling of repletion abruptly gives way to hunger-cramps. Violent diarrhoea succeeds the contrary discomfort of flatulence and intestinal fermentation.

The native population thus finds that both their bodies and their spirits are radically affected by changes in diet. As Audrey Richards has said with so much insight, it is not surprising that such communities regard food as perilous stuff, charged with every sort of magic influence. They therefore associate the sensations engendered by food with feelings to which we attribute a different

origin; the inner glow produced by alcohol is for them a sign of anger, whereas they connect fasting with the highest spiritual emotions. “I feel like a young girl again, I’m so light hearted!” exclaimed one old African woman, on a day when she chanced to have eaten her fill.

In the history of the human race there is a memorable, yet unknown day: the date when man



© Claude Lévi-Strauss  
Tupi-Kawahib woman stirring Cauim,  
a slightly fermented beverage (Brazil, 1935-1939).

discovered how to keep two different sources of nourishment at his disposal all the year round and, by combining them, overcame the two great dangers to his nourishment- the scarcity of food and its insipidity.

For to eat one’s fill is not enough. As a French proverb has shrewdly put it, one must not lose “the taste for bread”. The whole

history of cooking is the story of a search for means of making bread tasty, of creating and fostering the appetite for a basic foodstuff – bread, rice, millet, maize or manioc, according to the region- which supplies energy but has little flavour. Meat came later; for a long time it was, and in many parts of the world it still is, a luxury reserved for the privileged. The real foundation of cooking throughout the world is carbohydrates enlivened by a condiment. Bread and onions, chapattis and chutney, rice and sauce made from fermented fish; millet, maize or manioc with pimentos – all these are simply variations on a universal theme, on which the art of cooking has built up countless melodies.

## Spices changed the world

The difficulties attending this quest of flavours are illustrated by the great sea voyages of the 16th century, undertaken with what today seem the most trivial motives. Only some 400 years ago, Europe was organizing those tremendous expeditions chiefly for the purpose of obtaining spices.

This marks the birth of cooking in Europe and, perhaps everywhere else as well, since no culinary style seems able to do without certain products of American origin, unknown elsewhere in the world before the discovery of the New World – potatoes, tomatoes, peanuts, chocolate, • • •

••• vanilla and pimentos. A whole chapter of ethnology in fact, remains to be written. It would describe the character and geographical distribution of the rules – some very simple, others incredibly complex- for obtaining, treating, associating and mingling the various basic foodstuffs. It would reveal the Polynesians as the inventors of the soil-less agriculture, for some of these islanders succeeded in cultivating gardens on their coral reefs, in trenches filled with putrefied refuse: it would show that certain tribes, though extremely primitive in other respects, have performed the extraordinary feat of producing basic foodstuffs from poisonous plants such as manioc and acorns.

It would also show that certain primitive peoples have developed cooking that is full of subtleties. In one of his books on the Kwakiutl (inhabitants of the North-West Coast of America), the distinguished American ethnologist F. Boas gives no less than 156 recipes for preparing various kinds of fish, fruit, and wild root-vegetables. One of these, chosen at random, consists in beating up snow until it has the consistence of whipped cream and then mixing it with fish-oil, molasses and uncooked berries.

Under the descriptive title *Zuni Breadstuffs*, a book by another ethnologist, Cushing, gives a fascinating account of the production and preparing food in this Pueblo Indian tribe of New Mexico.



© UNESCO/P. Morel Vasquez  
**Multicoloured spices at Aswan market (Egypt, 2008).**

A feast consists of 14 courses- rolls and wafers of maize in six different colours, various kinds of meat, offal, mutton sausages and blood pudding. All these are eaten with a meat- brush, a small, stiff-bristled affair which is alternately thrust into the dish and sucked clean.

### Shamed fish do not return

The consumption of food is a distinctly social affair. There are very few peoples who, like the Paressi of Central Brazil, take

their meals in “solitary confinement”, so as to conceal the “indecent” act of eating. Writing on the Kwakiutl, Boas describes the etiquette •••

*“Our cooks, unlike the tribal ones, have forgotten what was once an essential rite – that of doing honour to the animals about to be eaten, so that their species may not vanish from the earth.”*

• • • of a ceremonial feast: the culinary preparations, the arrangement of the different kinds of vessels and mats, the despatch of messengers with the invitations (which must be refused several times before final acceptance), the songs in honour of the guests, and the bestowal on each of them of a specially selected portion, befitting his rank.



© Aleksandar Džoni-Šopov

**Fish cannot be consumed among the Tsimshian tribespeople without giving it the honours it deserves.**

There is nothing to surprise us in all this; Kwakiutl etiquette is not so different from our own formal dinners. We too honour our guests with embroidered cloths, silver plates and with choice dishes. But our cooks, unlike the tribal ones, have forgotten what was once an essential rite – that of doing honour to the animals about to be eaten, so that their species may not vanish from the earth. Thus we sometimes

come across disconcerting instructions in native recipes, such as the following (originating with

water into which stones heated in the fire are dropped, the fat being skimmed off as it rises to the surface. The remainder of the fish is afterwards spread on a sieve above some recipient, and an old woman presses it to her naked breast as hard as she can, to squeeze out the rest of the fat (men are strictly forbidden to perform this degreasing operation).

The cakes of fish are then heaped up in a corner of the hut, where they lie rotting until they swarm with maggots. Despite the

intolerable stench, they must not be thrown away. Moreover, none of the “cooks” concerned is allowed to wash; every one must remain covered with filth until the end of the proceedings, which may last for two or three weeks. Otherwise the fish would be “ashamed” and would never come back again. ▲

the Tsimshian Indians of the northwest Pacific coast), which I offer as food for thought to housewives, on concluding this brief introduction to culinary ethnology.

When fat is to be extracted from olachen, the fish are first dried in the open air. They are then boiled in vessels filled with

continue from page 30

• • • gifts seems to have grown out of a like belief. It originated in the offering of green boughs to the Sabine King, Tatius, who shared the royal power with Romulus. These boughs were taken from the sacred wood of the goddess Strenia, and were thus called *strenae* in Latin, from which is derived the French, *étrennes*.

Strenia was the goddess of strength. For the Romans and for the Maoris alike, presents were objects endowed with a special power through the act of giving. From where did this power come? By the exchange of gifts, often of mere token value, people give expression in outward and visible form to the inner spirit of community life – spontaneous acceptance of interdependence one

with another. This annual New Year festival, at which flowers and sweets, ties and illustrated cards change hands, is not then to be decided. It is an occasion when all men realise that the society in which they live is based on this very principle of give-and-take. ▲



# TODAY'S CRISIS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

At the time when African countries were gaining their independence, it seemed anthropology was about to fall victim to a dual conspiracy, fostered by the people hostile to it and those becoming extinct. What is the role of anthropology in the modern world? Lévi-Strauss replies in the November 1961 Courier.

**Claude Lévi-Strauss**

The important place social anthropology holds in the contemporary thinking may seem paradoxical to many people. It is a science very much in vogue: witness not only the fashion for films and books about travel, but also the interest of the educated public in books on anthropology.

Towards the end of the 19th century people were apt to look to the biologist in their quest for a philosophy of man and the world, and then later to the sociologist, the historian, and even the philosopher.

But for the past several years, anthropology has come to play the same role, and today it too is expected to provide us with deep reflections on our world and a philosophy of life and hope.

It is in the United States that this approach to anthropology seems to have begun. As a young nation intent on creating a humanism of its own, America broke with traditional European thinking. It saw no reason why the



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**Nambikwara tribesman with his face coated with ashes (Brazil, 1935-1939).**

civilizations of Greece and Rome should be admired to the exclusion of all others merely because in the Old World of the Renaissance, when mankind came to be considered the most proper and necessary study of man, these were the only two civilizations sufficiently known.

Since the 19th century and especially the 20th, practically every human society on our planet has become accessible to study. Why then limit our interests? And indeed, when we contemplate humanity in its entirety we cannot

fail to recognize the fact that for 99/100ths of mankind's existence, and over most of the inhabited globe, there have been no customs, no beliefs, and no institutions which do not fall within the province of anthropological study.

This was strikingly emphasised during the last war with the struggle waged on a world-wide scale. Even the most obscure and remote corners of our planet were suddenly catapulted into our lives and consciousness and . . .

• • • took on three-dimensional reality. These were the lands where the last “savage” peoples on earth had sought safety in isolation – the far north of America, New Guinea, the hinterlands of south-east Asia, and certain islands in the Indonesian archipelago.

## Shrinking world

Since the war, many names, once charged with mystery and romance, have remained on our maps but now they designate landing spots for long-distance jet liners. Under the impact of aviation and with increase in world population, our planet has shrunk in size, and improved communications and travel facilities permit us no longer to close our eyes or remain indifferent to other peoples.

Today there is no fraction of the human race, no matter how remote and retarded it may still appear, which is not directly or indirectly in contact with others, and whose feelings, ambitions, desires and fears do not affect the security and prosperity and the very existence of those to whom material progress may once have given a feeling of ascendancy.

Even if we wanted to, we could no longer ignore or shrug off with indifference, say, the last head-hunters of New Guinea, for the simple reason that they are interested in us. And surprising though it may be, the result of our contacts with them means that both they and we are now part of the same world, and it will not be long before we are all part of the same civilization.



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**Caduveo hair pin brought back by Claude Lévi-Strauss from the Mato Grosso (Brazil).**

For even societies with the most widely divergent patterns of thought and whose customs and mores took thousands of years to evolve along isolated paths, impregnate one another once contact is established. This occurs in many, devious ways; sometimes we are clearly aware of them, often we are not.

As they spread throughout the world, the civilizations which (rightly or wrongly) felt that they had reached the height of development, such as Christianity, Islamism, Buddhism, and on a different level the technological civilization that unites them, become tinged with the “primi-

tive” way of life, “primitive” thinking and “primitive” behaviour which have always been the subject of anthropological research. Without our realizing it, the “primitive” ways are transforming these civilizations from within.

For the so-called primitive or archaic peoples do not simply vanish into a vacuum. They dissolve and are incorporated with a greater or lesser speed into the civilization surrounding them. At the same time the latter acquires a universal character.

## Anthropology: a science without an object?

Thus, far from diminishing in importance, primitive peoples concern us more with each passing day. To take only one example, the great civilization the West is justly proud of, and which has spread its roots across the inhabited globe, is everywhere emerging as a “hybrid”. Many foreign elements, both spiritual and material, are being absorbed into its stream.

As a result, the problems of anthropology have ceased to be a matter for specialists, limited to scholars and explorers; they have become the direct and immediate concern of every one of us.

Where then, lies the paradox? In reality there are two –insofar as anthropology is chiefly concerned with the study of “primitive” peoples. At the moment when the public has come to recognize its true value, we may well ask whether it has

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© Claude Lévi-Strauss

**Claude Lévi-Strauss in Brazil (1935-1939).**

*“The general rules for the development of society and culture, and even the limits of ethnography (“anthropology”) as a science, are the object of controversy. But the way in which Lévi-Strauss deals with these problems and others suffers from excessive formalism, inherent in the “structural” method that is currently favoured in scientific circles, of which Lévi-Strauss is known to be the most eminent representative.”*

*Professor S.A. Tokarev (Soviet Union),  
UNESCO archives:  
document dated 20 May 1966.*

• • • not reached the point where it has nothing more left to study.

For the very transformations which are spurring a growing theoretical interest in “primitives” are in fact bringing about their extinction. This is not really a new phenomenon. As early as 1908, when he inaugurated the chair of Social Anthropology at the University of Liverpool, Sir James Frazer (author of the monumental *Golden Bough*) dramatically called the attention of governments and scholars to this very problem. Yet we can hardly compare the situation half a century ago with the large-scale extinction of “primitive” peoples which we have witnessed since then.

Let me cite a few examples. At the beginning of white settlement in Australia, the aborigines num-

bered 250,000 individuals. Today no more than 40,000 are left.

Official reports describe them herded in reserves or clustered near mining centres where in the place of their traditional wild food gathering parties they are reduced to sneak-scavenging in rubbish heaps outside the mining shacks. Other aborigines, who had retreated deep into the forbidden desert, have been uprooted by the installation of atomic explosion bases or rocket launching sites.

Protected by its exceptionally hostile environment, New Guinea with its several million tribesmen may well be the last great sanctuary of primitive society on earth.

But here too, civilization is making such rapid inroads that the 600,000 inhabitants of the central mountains who were totally unknown as mere twenty

years ago, are now providing labour contingents for the building of roads. And it is no rarity today to see road signs and milestones parachuted into the unexplored jungle!

But with civilization have come strange diseases, against which “primitives” have no natural immunization and which have wrought deadly havoc in their ranks. They are succumbing rapidly to tuberculosis, malaria, trachoma, leprosy, dysentery, gonorrhoea, syphilis and the mysterious disease known as Kuru. The result of primitive man’s contact with civilization, though not actually introduced by it, Kuru is a genetic deterioration which inevitably ends in death and for which no treatment or remedy is known.

In Brazil, 100 tribes became extinct between 1900 and 1950. The Kaingang, from the state of Sao Paulo, • • •



• • • numbering 1,200 in 1912, were no more than 200 in 1916, and today have dwindled to 80.

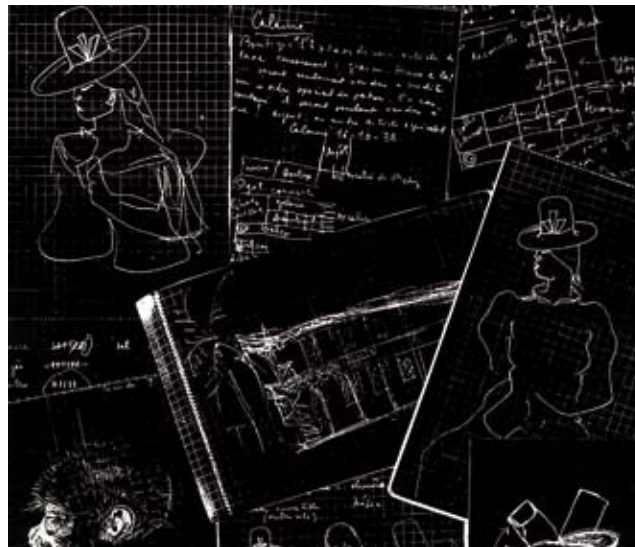
The Munduruku were 20,000 in 1925 – in 1950 they numbered 1,200. Of the 10,000 Nanmbikwara in 1900, I could trace only a thousand in 1940. The Kayapo of the river Araguaya were 2,500 in 1902 and 10 in 1950. The Timbira 1,000 in 1900 and 40 in 1950.

How can this rapid decimation be explained? Foremost, by the introduction of Western diseases against which the Indian's body had no defence. The tragic fate of the Urubu, an Indian tribe from north-eastern Brazil, is typical of many others. In 1950, only a few years after they were discovered, they contracted the measles. Within a few days, out of the population of 750 there were 160 deaths. An eyewitness has left this stark description:

"We found the first village abandoned. All the inhabitants had fled, convinced that if they ran far away they would escape the sickness which they believed was a spirit attacking the village.

We discovered them in the forest, halted in their flight. Exhausting and shivering with fever in the rain, nearly all of them had fallen victim to the disease. Intestinal and pulmonary complications had so weakened them that they no longer had strength to seek food.

Even water was lacking, and they were dying as much from hunger and thirst as from the



© Claude Lévi-Strauss  
Drawing from Claude Lévi-Strauss's travel notebook (Brazil, 1935-1939).

disease. The children were crawling about on the forest floor trying to keep the fires alight in the rain and hoping to keep warm. The men lay burning and paralyzed by fever; the women indifferently thrust away their babes seeking their breast."

## Indigenous superseded by indigent

In 1954, on the Guapore at the border of Brazil and Bolivia, a mission was established and four different tribes were incited to form a single group. For several months there were 400 people there, all of whom were exterminated by measles shortly thereafter...

But in addition to infectious diseases, vitamin and other nutritional deficiencies are also an important problem. Motor-vascular

disorders, eye lesions and dental decay, unknown to primitive man when he lived according to his ancient ways, make their appearance when he is confined to villages and must eat food which does not come from his native forest. Then, even the old and tried traditional remedies, such as charcoal dressings for severe burns, prove useless. And simple diseases to which tribesmen have long been accustomed, become extraordinary virulent.

The decimation of the Indians is due to other, less direct causes, such as the collapse of the social structure or pattern of living. The Kaingang of Sao Paulo already mentioned, lived by a series of strict social rules with which every anthropologist is acquainted. The inhabitants of each village were divided into two groups on the principle that the men from the first group could marry only women from the second group and vice-versa.

When their population diminished, the foundations permitting their survival collapsed. Under the rigid system of the Kaingang, it was no longer possible for every man to find a wife and many had no choice but celibacy unless they resigned themselves to mating within their own group – which to them was incest, and even then their marriage had to be childless. In such cases

• • •

### *The Kaingang today*

When Claude Lévi-Strauss published this text in the *Unesco Courier*, the Kaingang were making a painful recovery from several decades of extermination and massacre. The infant mortality rate of most of the groups was very high at that time, and the worst was to be feared, due to the devastation wreaked by malaria, tuberculosis and alcoholism. The Kaingang were then confined to reservations administered by the Indian Protection Service of the Brazilian federal government, and they were considered by specialists as being on the way to cultural dissolution and rapid assimilation in the national community.

Today, with a population estimated at approximately 30,000, spread over the four States in the South of the country — São Paulo, Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul —, the Kaingang are one of the largest Amerindian groups in Brazil. Strong demographic growth over the last few decades means that the reservations are too small to contain a population that is young and more and more frequently attends school.

Despite the migration to cities, the bonds with territory and traditions remain essential. These bonds are concretely expressed by the desire to revitalize and modernize the Kaingang identity, particularly by promoting the learning of the language and the transmission of the oral tradition. Furthermore, the Kaingang consider themselves as fully-fledged Brazilian citizens. From an anthropological point of view, this is one of the many paradoxes of globalisation, which is accompanied by a vigorous affirmation of local identities.

Contemporary anthropology has not become a science without an 'object'. On the contrary, it is enjoying unprecedented growth, largely as a result of the lesson the young fledgling ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss learnt in 1935 from his very first meeting with Amerindians, a small group of Kaingang in the State of Paraná in Brazil. In his famous work *Tristes Tropiques* Lévi-Strauss wrote that he was struck by the level of social decomposition of this group, who appeared to him to be neither "real Indians", nor "savages", nor "pure Indians". From this meeting, Lévi-Strauss retained the lesson of prudence and objectivity, which is still relevant to anthropology today, and which consisted in not being satisfied with external appearances when faced with a culture that had suffered from the onslaught of colonialism.

*Robert Crépeau, Montreal University (Canada)*



© Clarissa Becker  
**Kaingang boy.**

• • • a whole population can disappear within a few years. [These observations on the disappearance of the Indians of Brazil are drawn chiefly from a study by the noted Brazilian anthropologist, Dr Darcy Ribeiro, entitled "Convívio et Contaminação" published in "Sociologica", Vol. XVIII, No. 1 Sao Paulo, 1956].

Bearing this in mind, need we be surprised that it is more difficult not only to study the so-called primitive peoples but even to define them satisfactorily. In

recent years, a serious attempt has been made to revise existing thinking regarding protective legislation in the countries facing this problem.

Neither language nor culture nor the conviction of belonging to a group, are valid as criteria for a definition. As enquiries of the International Labour Organization have emphasized, the notion of *indigenous* people is being superseded by the concept of indigence. [ILO, *The Aboriginal populations*. Geneva, 1953].

## Peoples who refuse to be the object of study

But this is only half of the picture. There are other parts of the world where tens and hundreds of millions of people live, who were traditionally the subject of anthropology. These populations are increasing rapidly in number in Central America, the Andes, south-east Asia and Africa. But here too, anthropology faces a crisis. Not because the populations are dying out • • •

• • • but because of the nature of the people involved.

These peoples are changing and their civilizations are gradually becoming westernized. Anthropology, however, has never yet included the West within its competence or province. Furthermore, and even more important, there is a growing opposition in these regions to anthropological enquiries. Instances have occurred where regional museums of "Anthropology" have been forced to change their names and can only continue disguised as "Museums of Popular Art and Tradition".

In the young states which have recently obtained independence, economists, psychologists and sociologists are warmly welcomed by universities. The same can hardly be said of anthropologists.

Thus it would almost seem that anthropology is on the point of falling victim to a dual conspiracy. On the one hand are the peoples who have ceased physically to lend themselves to study but are simply vanishing from the face of the earth. On the other are those who, far from dead, are living a great population "explosion", yet are categorically hostile to anthropology for psychological and ethical reasons.

There is no problem about how to meet the first of these crises. Research must be speeded up and we must

take advantage of the few years that remain to gather all the information we can on these vanishing islands of humanity. Such information is vital for, unlike the natural sciences, the

*"Westerners will never (except in make believe) be able to act the role of "savages" opposite those whom they once dominated."*

sciences of man cannot originate their own experimentation.

Every type of society, of belief or institution, every way of life, constitutes a ready-made experiment for which preparation has taken thousands of years and as such is irreplaceable. When a community disappears, a door closes forever, locking away knowledge which is unique.

That is why the anthropologist believes that it is essential, before these societies are lost and their

social customs destroyed, to create sharper observation techniques, rather like the astronomer who has brought electronic amplifiers into play to capture the weakening signals of light from distant stars racing away from us.

The second crisis in anthropology is much less serious in the absolute since there is no threat of extinction to the civilizations concerned. But it is much more difficult to deal with it out of hand. I wonder whether it would help matters if we tried to dispel the distrust of the people who were formerly the anthropologist's field work by proposing that our research should henceforth no longer be "one way only". Might not anthropology find its place again if, in exchange for our continued freedom to investigate, we invited African or Melanesian anthropologists to come and study us in the same way that up to now only we have studied them?

Such an exchange would be very desirable for it would enrich the science of anthropology by widening its horizons, and set us on the road to further progress. But let us have no illusions- this would not resolve the problem, for it does not take into consideration the deep motives underlying the former colonised peoples



© Claude Lévi-Strauss  
Munde tribesman (Brazil, 1935-1939).



••• negative attitude to anthropology. They are afraid that under the cloak of an anthropological interpretation of history what they consider to be intolerable inequality will be justified as the desirable *diversity* of mankind.

If I may be permitted a formula which, coming from an anthropologist, can have no derogatory connotation even as pure scientific observation, I would say that Westerners will never (except in make believe) be able to act the role of “savages” opposite those whom they once dominated. For when we Westerners cast them in this role they existed for us

only as *objects* –whether for scientific study or political and economic domination. Whereas we, who in their eyes are responsible for their past fate, now appear to them inevitably as directing forces and therefore it is much harder or them to look at us with an attitude of detached appraisal.

By a curious paradox, it was undoubtedly a feeling of sympathy that prompted many anthropologists to adopt the idea of pluralism (this asserts the diversity of human cultures and concomitantly denies that certain civilizations can be classified as “superior” and others as “inferior”)

Yet these very anthropologists –and indeed all anthropology– are now accused of denying this inferiority merely to conceal it, and hence of contributing more or less directly to its continued existence.



© Claude Lévi-Strauss  
Tapehari, Tupi-Kawahib village chief (Brazil, 1935-1939).

### Science “from without”, anthropology becoming science “from within”

If therefore, anthropology is to survive in the modern world, there can be no disguising that it must be at the price of much deeper change than a mere enlarging of the circle (very restricted it is true up to now) by the rather childish formula of offering to lend our toys to the newcomers provided they let us go on playing with theirs.

Anthropology must transform its very nature and must admit

that logically and morally, it is almost impossible to continue to view societies as scientific objects, which the scientists may even wish to preserve, but which are now collective subjects and claim the right to change as they please.

The modification of anthropology’s subject matter also implies modifications in its aims and methods. And these fortunately appear quite feasible for our branch of science has never defined its purposes in the absolute but rather as a relationship between the observer and his subject. And it has always agreed to change whenever this relationship has been modified.

Doubtless, the property of anthropology has always been to investigate on the spot of “from within”. But only because it was impossible to investigate at a distance or “from without”. In the field of the social sciences, the great revolution of our times is that whole civilizations have become conscious of their existence, and having acquired the necessary means to do so through literacy, have embarked on the study of their own past and traditions and every unique aspect of their culture which has survived to the present day.

Thus, if Africa, for instance, is escaping from anthropology, it will not so easily escape from science. In place •••

• • • of the anthropologist – that is the outside analyst, working from the outside – study of the continent will be in the hands of African scientists, or foreigners who will use the same methods as their African colleagues.

They will no longer be anthropologists but linguists, philologists, historians of facts and ideas. Anthropology will gladly accept this transition to richer, more subtle methods than its own, confident that it has fulfilled its mission by keeping alive so much of the great riches of humanity on behalf of scientific knowledge, so long as it was the only branch of science able to do so.

## Diversity, anthropology's reason for being

As to the future of anthropology itself, it seems to lie now at the far extreme and the near extreme of its traditional positions. At the far extreme, in the geographical sense first, since we must go further and further afield to reach the last of the so-called primitive populations, and they are getting fewer and fewer; but in the far extreme in its logical meaning too, since we are now interested in the essentials.

On the near extreme, in the sense that the collapse of the material foundations of the last primitive civilizations has made their intimate experiences one of



© Claude Lévi-Strauss

**This Nambikwara tribesman is about to use a leaf to taste the brew he has prepared from roots. (Brazil, 1935-1939).**

our last fields of investigation, in place of the weapons, tools and household objects which have disappeared. But also because as Western civilization becomes more complex with each passing day and spreads across the whole of the earth, it is already beginning to show signs of the sharp differences which anthropology has made it its business to study but which it could formerly do only by comparing dissimilar and widely separated cultures.

Here no doubt, lies the permanent function of anthropology. For if there exists, as anthropologists have always affirmed, a certain "optimum diversity" which they see as a permanent condition of human development, then we may be sure that divergences between societies and groups within societies will disappear only to spring up in other forms.

Who knows if the conflict between the old and new generations, which so many countries are now experiencing, may not be the ransom that must be paid for the growing homogenization of our social and material culture? Such phenomena seem to me pathological but anthropology has always been characterized by its ability to explain and justify forms of human behaviour which men found strange and could not understand.

In this way anthropology at every phase has helped to enlarge the currently held and always too

constricting view of humanity. To picture the disappearance of anthropology, one would have to conjure up a civilization where all men – no matter what corner of the globe they inhabited, and whatever their way of life, their education, their professional activities, their ages, beliefs, sympathies and aversions – were, to the very roots of their consciousness, totally intelligible to all other men.

Whether one deplores it, approves it, or merely states it as a fact, technical progress and the development of communications hardly seem to be leading us to this end. And as long as the ways of thinking or of acting of some men perplex other men, there will be scope for meditation on these differences; and this, in a constantly renewing form, will be the abiding province of anthropology. ▲

# A DIFFICULT SURVEY

*UNESCO's decision to undertake a survey on the main trends of research in the social and human sciences did not delight Lévi-Strauss. In this 13 March 1964 text, of which we are printing excerpts, he points out the problems this project raises.*

## Claude Lévi-Strauss

*An article taken from this unpublished document appeared under the title "Criteria of science in the social and human disciplines" in the International Social Science Journal, XVI, 4, 1964.*

[...] The author of the present article hopes he is not abusing his freedom in confessing to the embarrassment, not to say uneasiness, he felt at the announcement of the survey decided upon by the UNESCO General Conference's resolution. In his view, the interest shown in the "main trends of research in the social and human sciences" is in sharp contrast to the way in which these sciences have been ignored and neglected in the very quarters where the greatest enthusiasm has been shown for the project. [...]

We should not have voiced similar doubts with regard to the previous survey of the trends of research in the natural sciences. But there the situation was different: those sciences have existed for so long, and have furnished so many and such striking proofs of their capabilities, that their reality is no longer in doubt. [...]

## A semantic fiction

The author of the present report has devoted his whole life to the social and human sciences. But he has not the slightest reluctance to admit that there can be no pretence that they and the natural sciences are really on an equal footing, or to acknowledge that the latter are indeed sciences while the former are not; and that if the same term is, none the less, applied to both, it is done on the strength of a

semantic fiction and a philosophical hope which has yet to be confirmed. The parallelism implied, even if only by the titles of the two surveys, therefore reveals a somewhat fanciful conception of the facts. [...]

But, before we start looking for a solution which will inevitably be unsatisfactory, it may be useful to review briefly certain contributory causes of the disparity between the physical and the human sciences. [...]

To tell the truth, the function of the human sciences seems to lie halfway between explanation and anticipation, as if they were unable to make a definite choice between the two roles. This does not mean that these sciences are useless from both the theoretical and the practical



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Reproductions of Caduveo drawings,  
by Claude Lévi-Strauss.



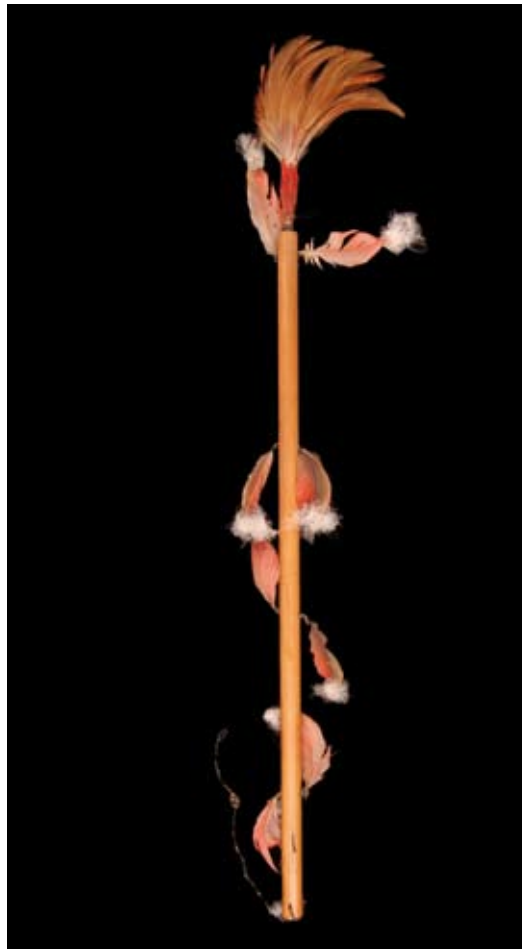
© François Briatte  
Filming an interview with Claude Lévi-Strauss, by P. Boucher.



• • • points of view, but rather that their usefulness has to be gauged by reference to both, neither of which can ever be considered entirely alone but, when combined, produce a new attitude in which the peculiar mission of the human sciences is epitomized. The human sciences never – or very seldom – explain completely, and they do not predict with complete certainty. But, for all that they may only understand a quarter or a half of what they have to consider, and may be able to foresee only in one out of two or four cases, they are yet able, because of the intimate connexion between these half-measures, to give to those who practise them something that comes between pure knowledge and practical efficiency – *discrimination*, or at any rate, a certain kind of discrimination which makes it possible, with slightly better understanding, to act a little less clumsily, although without ever being able to determine exactly what is owed to either of the two aspects. [...]

## What sciences are we talking about?

Should the “trends” of research in the survey be those of contemporary Western science, or should all the reflections on man produced at other periods and in other parts of the world be included? From a theoretical point of view, it is hard to see what principle could justify taking up the first



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**Dance stick brought back by Claude Lévi-Strauss from the Mato Grosso in Brazil (Height: 63,5 cm)**

position. But the alternative would raise practically insuperable difficulties [...]

I have proposed that the only researches to be used as a basis for the survey should be those capable of satisfying an external criterion – that of conformity to the standards of scientific knowledge as generally accepted, not only by specialists in the social and human sciences (which would bring in the danger of a vicious circle) but also by those in the exact and natural sciences.

On this basis, a very wide consensus should be obtainable. But it will at once be remarked

that, while the criterion of scientific knowledge can be defined only by reference to Western science (which, it seems, no society will contest), the social and human sciences with the best claim to inclusion are by no means all Western. Modern linguists readily admit that, as criteria of science in the social and human disciplines regards certain fundamental discoveries, Indian grammarians were several centuries ahead of them; and this is probably not the only field in which the advantage will have to be conceded to Eastern and Far Eastern knowledge.

In another sphere, ethnologists today are convinced that even societies at a very low technical and economic level, unacquainted with writing, have sometimes succeeded in giving their political or social institutions a conscious and considered character, which imparts a scientific value to them. [...]

If the progress of knowledge should eventually demonstrate that the social and human sciences deserve the name of sciences, the proof will come from experience: by verifying that the world of scientific knowledge is round, and in the belief that they are moving away from each other to achieve the status of positive sciences, although by opposite routes, the social and the human sciences, without even realizing it, will merge with the exact and natural sciences from which they will no longer be distinguishable. ▲

# LÉVI-STRAUSS REMEMBERS...

“The promotion of cultural diversity is undoubtedly a significant stage in UNESCO’s activities and particularly the safeguarding of intangible heritage,” says Claude Lévi-Strauss in this interview he gave UNESCO on 20 November 2006, in which he outlines his history with the Organization.

*Published here for the first time.*

**Interview by  
Georges Kutukdjian  
(UNESCO)**

I was named Secretary-General of the International Social Science Council (ISSC) when it was founded in 1952-1953 and the first President was Donald Young. The Director-General of UNESCO was Jaime Torres Bodet, but I had little contact with him. I served as ISSC Secretary-General until 1959-1960,

when I was elected to the Collège de France. I stepped down so that I could concentrate on teaching. During those years, my closest associates were Georges Balandier, Deputy Secretary-General who left the ISSC at the same time as I, and Mrs Edna Hindie Le May, my secretary, who later became my colleague at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales*, and who unfortunately died not long ago.

There was an incident in the early days of the ISSC that almost became a crisis. Some Soviets had been invited by UNESCO to one of the ISSC’s first meetings. The



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**Claude Lévi-Strauss at UNESCO’s 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration (2005).**

Americans who were going to take part in the meeting found out about it when they arrived in Paris. It was at the height of McCarthyism. They threatened to leave the next day, which would have compromised holding the meeting. Finally, the Soviets didn’t come and the incident was closed.

At UNESCO I was mainly in contact with the Social Science department – at the time headed by the Englishman Thomas H. Marshall – and in particular with Kazimierz Szczerba-Likiernik from Poland, designated by UNESCO as focal point for its dealings with

the ISSC. I also dealt several times with Samy Friedman, an Egyptian in the same department. Incidentally, when I left the ISSC, Szczerba-Likiernik, who had just retired from UNESCO, took over from me as Secretary-General. As did Samy Friedman, who became the third ISSC Secretary-General.

## Promoting cultural diversity

During those years, the two most memorable personalities I was involved with were Otto Klineberg (from Canada) and Alfred Métraux (from Switzerland). . . .

••• I'd met Klineberg in New York during the time I lived in the United States, from 1941 to 1947, when he was a professor at Columbia University. As for Métraux, he was a remarkable anthropologist with a post at UNESCO in the Social Science department, and his work was very influential. I believe in fact that Edgardo Krebs (from Argentina) is preparing an exhibition about Métraux at the Smithsonian Institution.

The gist of the ISSC's work consisted of promoting exchanges between the different disciplines, by bringing together people from very different backgrounds like anthropologists, sociologists, economists, psychosociologists, etc. You have to remember, specialists back then were confined to their disciplines and had little opportunity for dialogue.

After 1960, my contacts with UNESCO were episodic. Occasionally I contributed to the UNESCO Courier and the Social Science Bulletin, which became the International Social Science Journal (ISSJ). In 1950, UNESCO invited me to take part, with a group of international experts, in the drafting of the first Declaration on race, which was published in the UNESCO Courier. Ashley Montagu, an American, was the rapporteur of the group of experts. Subsequently UNESCO asked me in 1952 for a text on "Race and History". In 1971, it invited me to give a lecture about "Race and Culture", which the ISSJ published that same year. Later those last two texts were



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**Reproductions of Caduveo drawings,  
 by Claude Lévi-Strauss.**

published by UNESCO in the form of pamphlets and they've just recently been reprinted (in French and Chinese).

The promotion of cultural diversity is undoubtedly an important stage in UNESCO's activities and particularly the safeguarding of intangible heritage. During the

course of five trips to Japan between 1977 and 1988, I asked my hosts if I could visit weavers, carpenters – craftsmen, in short, who have traditional know-how. Anthropologists have always been interested in intangible heritage and have contributed greatly, through detailed descriptions and analyses, to making it known. ▲

*Claude Lévi-Strauss*



# ARCHIVES

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Le 31/7/53

Chère Madame,

Je vous prie d'excuser cette lettre manuscrite, mais la secrétaire du Conseil est en vacances et je suis moi-même à quelques heures de mon départ.

Avant de quitter Paris, je tenais à appeler votre attention sur l'utilité qu'il y aurait, dans la préparation du budget 1955-56, à accroître les prévisions de crédits pour le Centre.

Il est sans doute paradoxal d'envisager le développement d'une institution qui n'existe pas encore. Néanmoins, si le Centre commence à fonctionner au 1<sup>er</sup> octobre 1953, et s'il

dépense en 1954 d'une subvention de  $\$7.000 + \$1.000 = \$8.000$ , il est à prévoir que d'assez vastes projets seront mis en train pendant cette période de 15 mois : des plans détaillés de recherche sur le terrain seront élaborés ; divers séminaires seront envisagés. Enfin il faudra songer à publier les premiers travaux.

Je ne vois pas possible de vous proposer une évaluation précise. Néanmoins il conviendrait, me semble-t-il de prévoir, tant pour l'Administration que pour les recherches et les publications, des crédits de l'ordre du double de ceux disponibles en 1954.

En vous remerciant de votre bienveillante attention, je vous prie d'agréer, chère Madame, l'expression de mes hommages respectueux.

Jaume Livi / Franck

A partnership between the *UNESCO Courier* and the magazine *Sciences Humaines* for a tribute to one of the greatest contemporary anthropologists, who is celebrating his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday on 28 November 2008.



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