

Claude Lévi-Strauss obituary

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The fame of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who has died aged 100, extended well beyond his own subject of anthropology. He was without doubt the anthropologist best known to non-specialists. This is mainly because he is usually considered to be the founder of the intellectual movement known as structuralism, which was to have such influence, especially in the 1970s. He was one of those French intellectuals – like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur – whose influence spread to many other disciplines because they were philosophers in a much broader sense of the word than the academic philosophers of the British and American tradition.

As a result, these French writers have seemed more stimulating to some Anglo-Saxon thinkers, working in intellectually more imaginative, but perhaps less rigorous, areas such as literature, history or sociology than the home-grown product. Yet it is something of an irony that Lévi-Strauss should have been thought of in this way, as he considered himself, above all, a technical anthropologist, and he was a little surprised, if not also a little suspicious, of the enthusiasm for structuralism manifested by students of literature and others. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that he relished the literary fame that his work acquired, especially for his 1955 book *Tristes Tropiques*.

Lévi-Strauss was born in Brussels into a family of French artists, and followed a fairly typical career for a successful French humanities student. He attended the Lycée Janson de Sailly in Paris, and then the Sorbonne, where in 1928, at an exceptionally early age and with great success, he passed the formidable philosophy agrégation examination. He consequently became a kind of high-level school teacher in Laon, in Picardy, a type of post that was often a first step towards becoming a university teacher.

He soon became disillusioned with philosophy, however, because of what he saw as its sterile self-reference and mannerisms. He especially disliked the utilitarian and moralistic forms of philosophy dominant in France at the time. For a while he also became active in the French socialist movement but, subsequently, he seems to have lost interest in politics and was surprisingly uncommitted during the dramatic events of postwar France. Instead he became interested in anthropology, after reading the American anthropologist Robert Lowie, partly because he realised that the richness of the cultures then labelled as primitive gave the lie to the optimistic evolutionism of writers such as Auguste Comte.

As a result of this interest in anthropology he was proposed by the sociologist Célestin Bouglé as a member of a group of French academics who were being seconded to the new French-sponsored University of São Paulo in Brazil. He accepted a professorship in 1935, largely in the mistaken belief that he would be able to study the Amerindians. He did attempt to carry out a certain amount of anthropological research from there, but it was

difficult, and in 1939 he resigned from the post to carry out more systematic fieldwork among the Nambikwara and other indigenous peoples of the Mato Grosso and Brazilian Amazon. Although this field work has always been considered to be rather poor by many anthropologists, I find it rather impressive given the short time he spent with the Amerindians. More importantly it confirmed him in his sympathy and respect for the culture of the indigenous peoples of South America and also in his growing scepticism towards the philosophical and artistic achievements of the literate civilisations of the Old World.

This attitude must have been confirmed by the events of the second world war. First, Lévi-Strauss was called up for a very short time and experienced the humiliation of the fall of France and the armistice, and then he was faced by the growing discrimination and persecution against Jews in Vichy France. In 1941, he managed to escape and ultimately made his way to New York, where, the next year, together with other French intellectuals, he was given a post at the New School for Social Research. There, he, the theologian Jacques Maritain and others founded a kind of Free French university, the *École Libre des Hautes Études*. After the war he stayed on in the US until 1948, working as cultural attaché to the French embassy in Washington. On his return to France, he held a number of increasingly important posts at institutions, including the *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris, where he served as assistant director (1949-50), and the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, where he was director of studies in anthropology (1950-74). In 1959 he was elected to a chair of social anthropology at the *Collège de France*. Among many other honours he was, in 1973, awarded the Erasmus prize and elected to the French Academy.

It was during Lévi-Strauss's period in the US that "structural anthropology" became constructed. This led to what has come to be known as "structuralism" - a term used for a variety of theories both in anthropology and beyond, which, although they claim to be derived from his ideas, do not always bear much relation to his work. It is striking how, in spite of the immense respect with which he is treated, especially in France, he has no direct followers or students. Many claim and have claimed to be structuralists but it usually turns out that only a limited aspect of his thought has an influence on them, and at worst the adoption of the label "structuralist" was merely a matter of passing fashion. He is a lonely, if imposing, figure in the history of thought.

Levi-Strauss's own structuralism is a personal amalgam of a naturalist approach to the study of human beings and a philosophical attitude derived from this. The strictly scientific aspect was largely the result of the combination of two types of theoretical influences. The first has to do with his contact with American cultural anthropology, a relation that is ambiguous since it is so much "at a distance", as was to be his attitude to all other contemporary theoretical influences. Secondly, he came into contact with structural linguistics, a behaviouristic amalgam of European and American theories, and particularly the more imaginative work of Roman Jakobson, the Russian theoretician of language who was also at the New School at the time.

While in New York, Lévi-Strauss immersed himself in the great body of anthropological accounts of North and South Amerindians that early US anthropologists and linguists had been accumulating for more than a century. The data collected from the Amerindians and its complexity delighted him, and made him react permanently against reductionist explanations of culture, which implicitly denied the intellectual achievement that indigenous mythology and social thought represented. The contact with the structural linguists suggested to him an approach that could both generalise and remain true to the richness

and specificity of the original material. Thus Lévi-Strauss adopted the term “structural” from a very particular school of linguistics that flourished in the 1940s and 50s, which combined the influence of the Swiss, Ferdinand de Saussure, with that of the American Leonard Bloomfield.

The basis of the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss is the idea that the human brain systematically processes organised, that is to say structured, units of information that combine and recombine to create models that sometimes explain the world we live in, sometimes suggest imaginary alternatives, and sometimes give tools with which to operate in it. The task of the anthropologist, for Lévi-Strauss, is not to account for why a culture takes a particular form, but to understand and illustrate the principles of organisation that underlie the onward process of transformation that occurs as carriers of the culture solve problems that are either practical or purely intellectual.

For him anthropology was scientific and naturalistic, that is scientific in the way that structural linguistics had become scientific. By looking at the transformations of language that occur as new utterances are generated, by using the tools that a particular language makes available, structural linguistics was able, so Lévi-Strauss believed, to understand not only the irreducible specificities of a particular language, but also the principles that made their production possible. In this way, linguistics, as he understood it, was a branch of the humanities and a natural science that is able to connect directly with psychology and neurology.

By studying the richness of cultural forms and their continued transformations, much the same was to be achieved by anthropology, which was to be both a cognitive and a historical science. Thus, the meaning of symbols and concepts had to be studied both within the context of the working of the brain and the specificity of the historical flow of a particular culture. Anthropology was for Lévi-Strauss one of the cognitive sciences. It was to be compatible with recent discoveries concerning the working of the brain, although as time went on he seems to have given up keeping up with developments in this field. He was, however, insistent that although the cognitive could explain structure, it could not explain content.

This is the programme lying behind all of Lévi-Strauss’s major works. But, in a sense, it is also a manifestation of a much more fundamental approach and mood from modern English-speaking anthropologists. In contrast to most professional anthropologists, whose work often seems contained within the controversies of their time and which lacks a general theory of human nature, Lévi-Strauss writes as though he were a naturalist from far away, observing our planet and the ecology of its different species, including the human species, with an Olympian lack of involvement.

He was thus interested in the human species in general terms but, because he knew that for 99% of its existence, humankind has consisted of small groups with very low population densities living in close interaction with a multitude of other living species, he considered the study of peoples such as the pre-contact Amazonian Indians to be far more important and relevant than the details of the short-lived modern industrialised world.

This approach led him to pay particular attention to Amerindian myths, the study of which was the subject of most of his writing since the 1960s. In particular, it is the subject of the four-volume *Mythologiques* (1964-71). For Lévi-Strauss, Amerindian myths are the Indian’s speculation on the condition of interdependence of living things. Thus a myth about the

origins of wild pigs is related to marriage rules and to another myth about the benefits of cooking.

This is, for him, a speculation not so much utilitarian as philosophical. Human thought is, of course, governed by the structuring capacity of the human brain but not explained by it. In this light, the myths are the record of the true history of the principal philosophical endeavour of mankind, and Lévi-Strauss not only wanted to record this endeavour, but also to join it. The myths' subject matter is his subject matter. Thus, this most aloof of intellectuals saw himself as a participant in the Amerindian dialogues he analysed without claiming any kind of precedence for himself. Because the myths are about the interrelationship of living things, it is essential for him to understand the natural history of all species in order to understand our own natural history.

Understanding, or participating, in the ecological reflection of humans such as the Amerindians is not only what he considered most important to study for himself as an anthropologist: it also coloured his values. These, from time to time, particularly towards the end of his life, he allowed himself to make public. He repeatedly expressed his distaste for the narrowness and sterility of much post-neolithic thought, and its obsession with the exploitation of other living things rather than simply reflecting on the latter's complexity and mutual relationships. As a result, he became something of a hero to certain modern ecological ideologues. For Lévi-Strauss, writing and formal education are just as likely to lead to philosophical impoverishment as to anything else.

There is also another, even more fundamental, way in which his thought seeks to rejoin that of the mythology of the Amerindians as he understands it to be. Myths have no authors. Their creation occurs imperceptibly in the process of transmission or transformation over hundreds of years and across hundreds of miles. The individual subject, the self-obsessed innovator or artist so dear to much western philosophy, had, therefore, no place for Lévi-Strauss, and indeed repelled him. He saw the glorification of individual creativity as an illusion. As he wrote in *Tristes Tropiques*: "the I is hateful". This perspective is particularly evident in his study of Amerindian art. This art did not involve the great individualistic self-displays of western art that he abhorred. The Amerindian artist, by contrast, tried to reproduce what others had done and, if he was innovating, he was unaware of the fact. Throughout Lévi-Strauss's work there is a clear aesthetic preference for a creativity that is distributed throughout a population and that does not wear its emotions on its sleeve.

This central philosophical tenet of his approach has often been forgotten, partly because of some subsequent writers, such as Foucault or Derrida, who although they acknowledged his influence, were bizarrely labelled as post-structuralists, as though they differed from him in this respect. They were then credited with the idea of the "death of the subject" while, in this, they simply followed in his footsteps. Yet, the philosophical implications of this position not only implicitly underlay so much of his thought, but were made quite explicit in the polemic against Sartre's glorification of individual choice, which forms the final part of Lévi-Strauss's most adventurous book, *The Savage Mind* (1962).

Of course, his theories have been much criticised, and few would now subscribe to them in the way that they were originally formulated, but nonetheless many anthropologists, including myself, are continually amazed and awed by the fact that, through the use of a theory that many consider flawed, or at least rather vague, Lévi-Strauss gained the most illuminating and unexpected insights in almost all fields of social and cultural [anthropology](#).

Given his personality and, indeed, his theories, the extraordinary lionisation he received on the occasion of his 100th birthday seems ironic. It was as if the French establishment and the French state had decided that he was suddenly a major diplomatic asset. He had received drawers full of medals and prizes from all over the world and, as the international fame of its public intellectuals is the kind of thing France has always prided itself on, it made sure the birthday did not go unnoticed. Lévi-Strauss had become the last survivor of these great beasts such as Sartre, Foucault and the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and, what was more, he was politically uncontroversial. Also, the genuine interest of the previous French president Jacques Chirac in the culture of native peoples and in the acquisition of “primitive art” encouraged this apotheosis of a person who, for the general French public represented, above all, the lure of primitive exoticism.

So, when the great date came, nearly every French magazine had his photo on the cover. President Sarkozy went to his flat to wish him a happy birthday, and the ministry of foreign affairs helped to finance seminars in his honour in places as far apart as Iceland and India. The imposing amphitheatre of the newly created collection of indigenous art at the Quai Branly museum, in Paris, was named after him. Most significant of all, a large part of his work was republished in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. This honour is normally reserved for dead greats such as Racine or Aristotle, whose writings are thereby placed in a kind of leather-bound bibliophilic mausoleum and printed on paper normally only used for bibles.

This treatment is significant because, as Vincent Debaene points out in a cheeky introduction to the volume, France much prefers to represent its scientists and thinkers as great literary figures, rather than celebrate what they said or discovered.

And indeed all this adulation hardly considered seriously the core of Levi-Strauss’s work, the groundbreaking analysis of kinship systems that he published on his return to France in 1947 as *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, consisting of a detailed study of those societies where family ties determine who people must marry, or the minute examinations of North and South American myth. All these public tributes seem to obscure his prime identity as a professional anthropologist struggling with the basic traditional questions of the discipline.

We do not know what he thought of all this, since by then he felt too ill to respond, but his often-expressed preference for the anonymous creator, which seems to accord so well with his personality, does not square with all this fuss. He hated public occasions and was a very private person. He loved to be out of step with the received “correct” view of the moment. He was uncomfortable with disciples and fled from adulation.

To the members of his team in Paris, the image he evoked above all was the nearly permanently closed doors of his study. This is not to say that he was in any way a recluse. He was secretly warm and had a delightful sense of humour. He was charming and very considerate and respectful towards whoever he was dealing with, irrespective of status. I remember him at Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore, on the occasion of his being given an honorary degree, listening to students telling him about what they got from his work and not allowing them to be interrupted by the French ambassador, who failed in the attempt to barge in and drag him away in the direction of more important guests. The nearest he approached discourtesy was a faint hint of irony, but on the whole he preferred to be alone, working, reading and accumulating ever more details about the lives of the native Americans whom he so admired.

He married Dina Dreyfus in 1932, Rose Marie Ullmo in 1946, and Monique Roman in 1954, and had a son by each of his second and third wives – Laurent and Matthieu. He is survived by Monique and his sons.

- *Claude Lévi-Strauss, anthropologist, born 28 November 1908; died 30 October 2009*

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