


# Lévi-Strauss: Modern, Ultramodern, Antimodern

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However one might define his structuralism – as the final word on human culture (or nature); the clever creation of the last Enlightenment philosopher; the swan song of a great intellectual tradition; the invention of an aesthete; or, more simply, the work of a genius – it is undeniable that Claude Lévi-Strauss stands apart, a unique and towering presence in the panorama of twentieth-century anthropology and the human sciences. His thought and works have left an unmistakable mark on anthropology as a discipline as well as on many related bodies of knowledge, but they also influenced the broader culture for a large part of the last century. His concept of matrimonial exchange, his analysis of the ‘savage mind’, his theory of myth as ‘thought thinking itself’, together with his eloquent prose style and his extraordinary ability to move from anthropological theory to philosophy, then to literature and later to music and painting: Lévi-Strauss is a figure whose countless honors and accolades earned during the course of his long life still fail, perhaps, to fully capture the interest and admiration (as well as the criticism) that he attracted in half a century as a public intellectual. Even Clifford Geertz, who rather famously did not share his approach – deeming it the product of a certain ‘cerebralism’ (Geertz, 1973) – wrote that ‘the sense of intellectual importance that [Lévi-Strauss] structuralism brought to anthropology [...] will not soon disappear [...] and the effects [...] will be with us, I think, more or less permanently’ (Geertz 1988: 25–26). Many others also perceived his work, viewed in conjunction with cognitive science, as bearing the promise of new fruit.

Lévi-Strauss, however, never liked eclecticism. Faithful for more than sixty years to a vision of what anthropology could and should be, his immense body of work lives on, reminding us that one might speak, if not of everything, then at least of a great many things, while still remaining true to a fundamental organizing and guiding principle. Whether discussing kinship or ‘savage’ thought, totemism or myth – not to mention the siphons of molluscs, flowers, tattoos, *churinga*, masks, picturesque landscapes, or musical melodies – his structural machine dissects, distinguishes, compares, contrasts, and reorganizes myriad phenomena, each apparently devoid of intrinsic significance, within a coherent and fully-formed vision based on the conviction that the human mind functions according to certain ineluctable laws regardless of time or place. It could hardly be any more explicit. As Lévi-Strauss declared in his inaugural lecture from his chair in social anthropology at the Collège de France on 5 January 1960: ‘[Today] ethnology is conducted in two ways

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[...]; in the pure state and in the diluted state. A sound scientific attitude would not seek to develop ethnology where its method is mixed with other methods, where its object is confused with other objects' (Lévi-Strauss, 1983a: 26).

Alongside this 'scientific' or 'structuralist' Lévi-Strauss, however, there seems to have been another Lévi-Strauss, less influential but certainly no less famous, nor any less important for the impact of his anthropology on the broader reading public beyond that of specialist circles. This second Lévi-Strauss can be seen especially, but not solely, in the author of *Tristes Tropiques*, for whom 'snatches of music and poetry' (Lévi-Strauss, 1992a: 376) – a product of the refined intellectual atmosphere of his upbringing – functioned like traces of Proustian memory (a frequent Lévi-Straussian reference), in whose folds theory appeared to co-exist in harmony with lived experience. With Lévi-Strauss, of course, this type of personal experience became the job of all anthropologists, social outcasts whose vocation pushes them to 'go back thousands of years in time' (Lévi-Strauss, 1992a: 376) in search of time lost twice: lost to the society to which they belong, and lost to themselves as individuals, who, far from their fellow men, seek to understand their sense of alienation from them. This is the experience of the 'Lazarus of *Temps Modernes*' championed – philosophically speaking – by Susan Sontag in a famous 1963 essay; the man who, 'dead to his world',<sup>1</sup> returns to fulfill the destiny of one who feels the need to liberate himself from the only culture from which he is not yet free: his own.

Alongside his more strictly theoretical work, there is in fact in Lévi-Strauss a tendency toward lingering retrospection, particularly in *Tristes Tropiques*, that might even be called 'sentimental' if it weren't for the author's oft-stated 'repugnance' (Lévi-Strauss' own word) that he always claimed to feel anytime he was pushed to talk about himself – something that he would, however, inevitably and very capably do in this fascinating and utterly unique book. This 'personal side' of Lévi-Strauss seemed to combine with his *esprit géométrisant* and to balance out those aspects that displayed a more marked scientific bent, which revealed itself in his use of epistemological models from other spheres of knowledge (not a universally accepted technique, and one that was in fact disapproved of by many). This showed us a rather more concrete, more 'human', and thus much less 'cerebral' Lévi-Strauss than his structural machine could sometimes lead one to believe.

I do not propose here to return to the image of a Janus-faced Lévi-Strauss: one a theorist of structural anthropology, the other a memoirist; one a rationalist, the other permeated with 'primitive mysticism'. Nor do I intend to reconstruct the dichotomy in his work – no longer accepted today – between 'objectivizing textualization' and more intimate diaristic writing.<sup>2</sup> What I would like to suggest, however, is a different way of reading Lévi-Strauss' oeuvre, using the word 'oeuvre' in the sense of a 'cultural trace': the trace he left behind in both his ethnographic and his theoretical work, in the retrospection of *Tristes Tropiques*, as well as in the abundance of opinions he expressed in various forums at different times on a variety of facts and things of the past, present, and future world.

The title of this essay encapsulates this aim. The three adjectives modern, ultramodern, and antimodern possess an essentially descriptive function: they do not reflect a desire to see in Lévi-Strauss' work a series of 'phases' or 'moments' that unfold in linear succession. I admit it is difficult to embrace an oeuvre or an idea that developed over more than half a century without ceding to the illusion of movement or 'progression' from point A toward some type of final or complete 'system'. But Lévi-Strauss repeatedly, and more or less directly, dismissed the possibility of such a systematic reading of his work, despite the temptation that always lurks when dealing with ideas of such complexity.

Even when proceeding from a non-systematic look at Lévi-Strauss' oeuvre, however, one is nevertheless struck by certain ideas that continually appear and disappear, only to suddenly reappear and disappear again just as quickly. This can give the impression that his thought was somehow born fully formed, or built in one fell swoop, as Lévi-Strauss himself remarked on a number

of occasions – and not by accident – regarding the origins of human language. In fact, the same themes do continually recur in his work, lending the overall impression that one is confronted with something developed in advance. From this perspective, modern, ultramodern, and antimodern are not three adjectives referring to an equal number of phases in the development of his thought, but rather a set of three musical staves upon which the full score of his oeuvre unfolds.

## Modern

If there is, in Lévi-Strauss, something that can be seen as a point of departure, it is all too easy to trace it back to his years in America (or more precisely, New York), where his encounter with structural linguistics marked the *ouverture* and also, in a certain sense, the *finale* of his work.

To look more closely at this point of departure, which seems, as I just mentioned, to contain the seeds of its own conclusion, one might begin with the following thesis: the encounter with structural linguistics constituted a precondition for the development of Lévi-Strauss' modernism and, at the same time, contained the catalyst for its transformation into ultramodernism.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, from the early 1950s, Lévi-Strauss – like other *penseurs* of the past – tried to re-create his own discipline from the ground up and, with it, all the human sciences. The idea that ethnology (or anthropology) is an inexhaustible science, in its mission to unearth and classify the entire human experience, did not mean it could translate into something broader and deeper if it were reduced merely to the conscientious gathering of data, and the methodical organization of this data into distinct categories. Lévi-Strauss' idea of ethnology corresponded to that of anthropology more generally only in that it attempted, as he wrote in *Diogenes*, 'to explain the complete man by means of studying the whole social experience of man' (Lévi-Strauss, 1953: 70). This is, in essence, the goal of anthropology, and it is Lévi-Strauss' *modern* program, which places him squarely in line with a tradition that, since the advent of Renaissance humanism, strived for a total knowledge of mankind. Lévi-Strauss seems, then, to be aligned with the broader comparative impulse behind all of classical anthropology.<sup>4</sup> But if such research aims to understand the complete man, as Lévi-Strauss argued, just what does this completeness consist of? If a complete knowledge of mankind is not an 'encyclopedia' containing the systematic summation of data concerning the human experience in time and space, what other dimension must we draw upon to 'explain the complete man'? This data, while objective, cumulative, and sortable into distinct, ordered categories, is in fact still too strongly tied to the perceptible and phenomenal dimension of reality. Its combinations are endless, unmanageable. One must thus transcend the perceptible level of those elements that make up these possible combinations. Their significance is not contained purely within themselves or in combination, but *in their reciprocal relationships*.

It is common knowledge that the line of continuity linking Lévi-Strauss to the classical anthropological and ethnological tradition was broken, or at least changed course dramatically, when his research – which tended toward an ideal-limit of *truth* (in this case, concerning the social nature of man) – encountered the question of *meaning*. For Lévi-Strauss, his engagement with linguistics marked his abandonment of the classical concept of anthropology. It signaled his move away from a level of thought that we might call empirical toward a level of abstraction, and, at the same time, his distancing from the thoroughly 'modern' project of the understanding of the 'complete' man. But in truth he never fully abandoned this project; to the contrary, it was reinforced by his identification of those principles (oppositions, structures, formal relations) unique to the human mind, which connect the elements of perceptible experience with one another. This passage from an empirical onto a structural plane (a path already paved, according to Lévi-Strauss himself, by Marxism and psychoanalysis) acquired its distinct, well-defined physiognomy with structural linguistics, which would of course become the muse and inspiration of his anthropology.<sup>5</sup>

This perspective would lead him to abandon the old distinction between logical, rational, civilized thought, on the one hand, and pre-logical, mystic, and primitive thought, on the other. For Lévi-Strauss, this would be a matter of defining the invariable laws of human thought. These laws of thought (not the thoughts themselves, naturally) are invariable because the structures by which the mind articulates and organizes cognition of the phenomenal world are themselves invariable.<sup>6</sup> This is the ‘fulfillment’ of Lévi-Strauss’ modernity, and also his final point of departure from the universalizing project of the Western tradition in its modern sense. It is its outer limit, in that, forging ahead according to the principles that inspired his model, Lévi-Strauss reveals what I call his ‘ultramodernism’.

## Ultramodern

Just when Lévi-Strauss’ project seems to achieve its goal of a modern humanistic science, understanding the ‘complete’ man, this completeness itself disappears, dissolved into its various formal and abstract components. Paradoxically, in fact, the very effort to understand ‘the complete man’ would consist of dissolving him as a historical being, as a form of consciousness, and as a subject. Of course, the subject that Lévi-Strauss would dissolve first was that of Sartrean existentialism and of those philosophers who, as he wrote in a few scathing pages of *The Naked Man*, ‘are chiefly concerned to construct a refuge for the pathetic treasure of personal identity’ – the same philosophers who ‘prefer a subject without rationality to rationality without a subject’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 687).

Let us try to gauge these remarks. The subject upon which Lévi-Strauss took aim – ‘that unbearably spoilt child who has occupied the philosophical scene for too long now, and prevented serious research through demanding exclusive attention’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 687) – was not so much the Sartrean existentialism he so sharply criticized in *The Savage Mind*. Nor was it that of Husserl’s phenomenology or Dilthey’s hermeneutics, which Lévi-Strauss never appeared to have much use for (Hénaff, 2004), much less the subject as understood by his friend Merleau-Ponty, to whom he dedicated *The Savage Mind*. It was, rather, the subject of that kind of philosophy which, ‘by substituting for the Self on the one hand an anonymous Other, and on the other hand an individualized desire [...] would fail to hide the fact that they need only be stuck back together again and the resulting entity reversed to recognize underneath that very Self, whose abolition had been so loudly proclaimed’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 630).

If the subject of these philosophers was *gaté*, insufferable and ‘odious’, it was because Lévi-Strauss had, from the early 1950s, assigned himself the task to – in his words – ‘dissolve man’: something he would essentially accomplish first through the study of mythic structures (Lévi-Strauss, 1955b), then through his analysis of the ‘savage mind’, and finally with the return to myth in his immense four-volume exploration *Mythologiques*. His oft-stated goal was in fact to demolish the perspective of a humanism that placed man at the center of a historical universe that he had created for himself in a completely illusory fashion.

To these ‘humanists’, Lévi-Strauss would object that if one defines man according to historical criteria, it would be impossible to say anything about those very peoples ‘without history’ who constitute the privileged subject of ethnology. Peoples who most certainly did have a history, but who did not conceive of it in the same way we do; that is, as the product of man’s intention. ‘I believe’, he wrote in *The Savage Mind*, ‘the ultimate goal of the human sciences to be not to constitute, but to dissolve man. The pre-eminent value of anthropology is that it represents the first step in a procedure which involves others. Ethnographic analysis tries to arrive at invariants beyond the empirical diversity of human societies’. But, he continued, ‘it would not be enough to reabsorb particular humanities into a general one. This first enterprise opens the way for others [...] which

are incumbent on the exact natural sciences: the reintegration of culture in nature and finally of life within the whole of its physico-chemical conditions' (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 247).

That ethnology could be a science, and furthermore one capable of reshaping all the human sciences, as Lévi-Strauss had hoped years earlier, turned out to be linked to the completely paradoxical possibility that it would lead to the pre-emptive dissolution of man himself, and thus of its own subject. This is one of the many paradoxes that Lévi-Strauss placed before us. Speaking of the dissolution of the subject, it would not be out of place here to note the treatment, itself paradoxical, that Lévi-Strauss reserved for Rousseau, whom he often called the true 'founder of the sciences of man' – ignoring the fact that Rousseau also promoted a form of perception, in certain aspects of his thought, that was centered on the most modern subject there is: the drama of the individual human conscience.

Lévi-Strauss frequently returned to the theme of 'the dissolution of man'. The apotheosis of this dissolution found its most radical expression in the final chapter of the *Mythologiques*, but Lévi-Strauss often noted the need 'to reintegrate man with nature', or to bring our understanding of the human condition back in line with principles similar to those of the natural sciences, even in much earlier texts like *The Scope of Anthropology* and *The Savage Mind*, demonstrating that such an idea had been deeply rooted in his thinking from the very beginning. This explains statements like the following: 'Structuralism, unlike the kind of philosophy [associated with Sartre] which restricts the dialectic to human history and bans it from the natural order, readily admits that the ideas it formulates in psychological terms may be no more than fumbling approximations to organic or even physical truths'. Or: '[S]tructural analysis, which some critics dismiss as a gratuitous and decadent game, can only appear in the mind because its model is already present in the body' (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 689 and 692).

Still, the most vivid portrait of this long-sought dissolution of man in nature is certainly the comparison that Lévi-Strauss made, to great rhetorical effect, between structural linguistics and the genetic code. The former would actually anticipate the discovery of the latter – in the sense that combinations of elements devoid of their own intrinsic meaning can generate messages capable of simultaneously fostering and regulating communication: between human beings, in the former case, and between cells, in the latter. In a line that smacked of hyperbole, Lévi-Strauss seemed to have genuinely 'closed the books' on the subject of the humanities: '[W]hen Nature, several thousand million years ago, was looking for a model,' he wrote, 'she borrowed in advance, and without hesitation, from the human sciences: this is the model which, for us, is associated with the names of Trubetsky and Jakobson' (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 685).<sup>7</sup>

These assertions, drawn from works written by Lévi-Strauss over the course of two decades, reveal a remarkable degree of continuity in his thought, and demonstrate how his 'ultramodern' phase did not 'follow' a period that, anchored to a concept of knowing based on comparison and generalization, associated him more closely to the modernist project as commonly understood. Lévi-Strauss' ultramodernism co-existed with his modernism, proceeding in parallel with it like the second score of his intellectual symphony.

This ultramodernism, however, did not reveal itself solely in the deployment of the structural method that analyzed models of matrimonial exchange, classification systems of the natural and social world, modes of aesthetic production, and complex myths. The dissolution of man and the subject, in fact, emerges even in *Tristes Tropiques*, a text generally considered to be the product of the *other* Lévi-Strauss, the one more commonly defined as autobiographical, literary, or even primitivist.<sup>8</sup>

Recalling the motives behind his move away from philosophy in *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss declared that 'to reach reality one has first to reject experience, and then subsequently to reintegrate it into an objective synthesis devoid of any sentimentality'. He also argued that existentialism

seemed an invalid form of speculation, ‘because of its over-indulgent attitude towards the illusions of subjectivity’, ultimately observing: ‘The raising of personal preoccupations to the dignity of philosophical problems is far too likely to lead to a sort of shop-girl metaphysics, which [...] is extremely dangerous if it allows people to play fast-and-loose with the mission incumbent on philosophy [...] that is, to understand being in relationship to itself and not in relationship to myself’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1992a: 58).

The fate of the subject was already sealed in *Tristes Tropiques*, then, well before *The Savage Mind*, and far earlier than *The Naked Man*. And, once again, in a paradox: that is, precisely at the moment when Lévi-Strauss was more fully immersed than ever in that primitive world into which he had thrust himself, full of anticipation. The famous passages from *Tristes Tropiques* in which he describes his brief, disappointing encounter with a group of Tupi-Kawahib Indians seem to mark a key moment in the transformation of the ethnologist’s calling and, at the same time, the opening of new horizons for science:

After an enchanting trip up-river, I had certainly found my savages. Alas! they were only too savage [...]. They were as close to me as a reflection in a mirror; I could touch them, but I could not understand them [...]. Was it not my mistake, and the mistake of my profession, to believe that men are not always men? [...] I had only to succeed in guessing what they were like for them to be deprived of their strangeness: in which case, I might just as well have stayed in my village. Or if, as was the case here, they retained their strangeness, I could make no use of it, since I was incapable of even grasping what it consisted of. (Lévi-Strauss, 1992a: 333)

How could one penetrate their secrets, then? How could one place them within a coherent system of understanding? The paradoxical response was: to ignore them. Ignore the savages, forget them; this is precisely what Lévi-Strauss seems to do when, having given in to such thoughts – that the cognitive distance separating him from the Indians was greatest at the very moment of their closest physical proximity – he turns his attention to nature (a point frequently ignored by Lévi-Strauss exegetists), intimating that what he writes about the countryside already contains an indication of what for him is the only feasible path to a true knowledge of man:

But if the inhabitants were mute, perhaps the earth itself would speak to me [...] perhaps it would answer my prayer and let me into the secret of its virginity. Where exactly does that virginity lie, behind the confusion of appearances which are all and yet nothing? I can pick out certain scenes and separate them from the rest; is it this tree, this flower? They might well be elsewhere. [...] I reject the vast landscape, I circumscribe it and reduce it to this clayey beach and this blade of grass: there is nothing to prove that my eye, if it broadened its view of the scene, would not recognize the Bois de Meudon around this insignificant fragment, which is trodden daily by the most authentic savages but from which, however, Man Friday’s footprint is missing. (Lévi-Strauss, 1992a: 333–334)

And so the Indians, being incomprehensible, simply disappear. They disappear as human beings in flesh and blood, just as the natural habitat around them disappears: broken down into discrete elements, into those traits of their culture most easily identifiable to the ethnographer’s eye, and thus comprehensible to the anthropologist’s intellect.<sup>9</sup> Like their surroundings, they are part of a larger undertaking that, for the anthropologist, consists of ‘attempting to think as they think, and with their materials’ (Geertz, 1973: 357), above all the nature that surrounds them. Put simply, they disappear as subjects.

It was no coincidence, then, that such ‘primitive societies’, as Lévi-Strauss frequently called them, remained one of the most significant rhetorical, and naturally epistemological, encounters in Lévi-Strauss’ entire oeuvre. Indeed, in one of the most important passages in his famous inaugural

lecture at the Collège de France (1960), he asked himself rhetorically: ‘What, then, are the reasons for the marked preference we show for these societies which, although certainly not primitive, are so-called for lack of a better word?’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1983a: 26).<sup>10</sup> They were incomprehensible, these primitive societies – ‘although’, as Lévi-Strauss himself clarified, they are ‘certainly not primitive’ – but it was thanks to them that it was possible to construct an ethnology central in its own right to anthropology more generally. If this were so, it was only because *we ourselves imagine these societies to be primitive*. A paradox, perhaps nonsensical, to define a society in a certain way while at the same time denying that it truly exists as we define it. Nevertheless, as in a clever, well-constructed suspense story, the truth is only revealed in the final act: the non primitive-primitives, Lévi-Strauss solemnly declared, are ‘living testimonials of what we want to preserve’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1983a: 30).

If the primitives, ‘pathetic creatures caught in the toils of mechanized civilization’, are living proof of what we want to preserve, what we want to preserve are not the primitives themselves, but that which they retain and represent, in the shadows of the South American rainforests: the ‘ultimate truth’ through which, and in which, it is possible – again, paradoxically – to ‘dissolve Man’. We have come full circle, and at the extreme opposite end from ‘us’, the civilized, we find the ‘others’, our brothers, mute primitives whose greatness, unbeknownst to themselves, consists precisely of their remaining such (Lévi-Strauss, 1992a: 41).<sup>11</sup>

This is the outer limit of Lévi-Strauss’ ultramodernism: the subject, not just that of certain philosophers, but also that of the *indios*, the last ‘living testimonials of what we want to preserve’, is dissolved once and for all. The conclusion of *Tristes Tropiques* may have offered a premonition, but the final death knell sounded, as I have suggested, in the famous last two pages of *The Naked Man*; pages as extraordinary for their evocative, stylistic power as they are unsettling for the abyss Lévi-Strauss perceives below man’s feet (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 694–695).<sup>12</sup> Pages in which even the last word – *rien*, nothing – seems to suggest the immense arc drawn by the author to confess that man’s ‘hive-like activity’, digging the ‘void created by our frenzy’ into which human cultures are destined to ‘sink’ (all expressions drawn from the end of *Tristes Tropiques*), has been futile and useless in the face of the imperturbable cosmos.

When, in the course of reasoning that claims to be scientific, the imperturbability of the cosmos (‘the impassive face of the earth’) is assumed as something more than a simple statement of fact, and even becomes a yardstick for the human condition, this scientific reasoning, and with it the cosmos itself, is transformed into something else. Two paths are then left open: either to *believe* (which Lévi-Strauss does not), or to declare oneself a pessimist. Indeed, as Lévi-Strauss states:

The fundamental opposition, the source of the myriad others with which the myths abound and which have been tabulated in these four volumes, is precisely the one stated by Hamlet, although in the form of a still over-optimistic choice between two alternatives. Man is not free to choose whether to be or not to be. (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 694)

If it is not up to man to choose, what sense is there in human history? This perhaps explains the element of nostalgia, the sense of loss, the so-called ‘primitivism’, which Lévi-Strauss seems to indulge in repeatedly throughout his work. Certainly, these are themes that are accentuated with the passing of time, and which in some cases evolve and give rise to positions judged at times to be excessively cautious, if not openly conservative. But it would be wrong, I believe, to argue that these themes – primitivism, nostalgia, the sense of loss, all sharing an obvious pessimism – were a belated product of his thought. To the contrary. Like his modernism, and like his ‘ultramodernist’ variation, these motives – nostalgia, loss, the sense of the futility of all action – also belong in the symphony; they are the third stave in the score of his thought.

## Antimodern

What could possibly be left after that *rien* – nothing – definitively pronounced in the ‘Finale’ to *The Naked Man*, if not the sense of loss of a state in which men were, if rather more dependent on nature, still far less enslaved to society than they are today? To that immense edifice which man has built around himself like a cage, in which he finally understands the fundamental futility of his every act? Indeed, where his every effort to revolt is matched by his increased dependence on what he himself has built, and thus whose ultimate outcome can only, in the end, prove fatal: ‘The world began without man and will end without him’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1992a: 413).

This is the background against which Lévi-Strauss projected the antimodernist version of himself – if by antimodernism we understand not the desire to return to a thoroughly improbable primitive state (which in Lévi-Strauss is of course completely absent), but rather a persistent, if not truly systematic, criticism of the supposed progress of the society that we generally call ‘modern’. The criticism of one who has passed *through* modernism, and seems to have followed it all the way to its most extreme logical consequences.

In a recent book on French antimodernism, the literary theorist Antoine Compagnon has written: ‘The antimodernists are not so much reactionaries as they are moderns in spite of themselves, those who live life moving forward while looking in their rear-view mirror, as Sartre said of Baudelaire’ (Compagnon, 2003: 137).

Let us examine, then, this antimodernism of Lévi-Strauss, the third score in his symphony. For Lévi-Strauss, the project of modernity that he too had pursued began with humanism, which he wanted to strip of what he denounced as its ambiguity. On the one hand, it was true, humanism constituted the beginning of interest in other cultures; but on the other, it was also, as he declared in a famous 1979 interview, the beginning of ‘all the tragedies we have lived through [...] first with Colonialism, then Fascism, then the Nazi Extermination Camps – all of that counts not against or in contradiction to the alleged humanism we have practised for several centuries, but I would rather say as its natural extension’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1979: 24).<sup>13</sup> In fact, Lévi-Strauss believed humanism to be responsible for having separated man from nature and, having drawn a clear line between man and all other living creatures, then opening the door to the division of human beings themselves into different categories, admitting the possibility that those deemed inferior could be sacrificed in the name of those held to be superior.

Tzvetan Todorov has pointed out how Lévi-Strauss’ negative view of humanism did not allow him to make the appropriate qualifications. To argue that the extermination of the Jews was a consequence of humanism:

[...] implies not only that the speaker is disregarding or repressing the ideological origins of fascism in nineteenth century *antihumanism* (in France, the racism of Gobineau, Renan, or Vacher de Lapouge [...]), but also that the speaker is willfully cultivating a logical paradox, since he is complacently deducing the thesis of the *inequality* of man on the basis of human *equality*. (Todorov, 1993: 68)

Tracing men’s inequality to the drive to consider them (and perhaps treat them) as equals is indeed a paradox. As it is paradoxical to attribute the misdeeds of colonialism and racism to humanism and its ‘exportation’ of the Enlightenment.<sup>14</sup> To argue this idea means falling in line with the slogans of those who would shift the blame onto others; just as it means not perceiving the movement of forces and interests that operated under assumptions very different indeed from that of considering or treating all human beings as equals.<sup>15</sup>

Lévi-Strauss’ antihumanism thus did not allow for distinctions between totalitarianism and democracy. To ignore this opposition, Todorov writes, is legitimate ‘on the geological time scale



[...]; it is a different matter if the unit of measure is a human lifetime. Stones and plants suffer perhaps as much under a tyrannical government as under a democracy [...] but the same cannot be said from the standpoint of human beings' (Todorov, 1993: 68). It is perhaps no coincidence that Lévi-Strauss' paradoxical reflections on humanism were matched by other, equally paradoxical opinions on topics such as the encounter of cultures, progress, equality, and freedom.

In a study several years ago, Albert O. Hirschman (1991) demonstrated how both conservative and progressive thought were informed by reductive styles of argumentation that could be categorized by what Hirschman called the reactionary rhetorics of perversity, futility, and jeopardy. The perversity thesis put forward the idea that every act aimed at improving some aspect of the existing order (whether political, social, or economic) served only to exacerbate the condition which it aimed to remedy, obtaining the precise opposite result of that intended. The futility thesis referred to the feeling that all efforts to transform society would come to naught, since the deep structures of the social system resisted change and ultimately made it impossible. Finally, the jeopardy thesis held that the cost of any proposed or actual change would prove to be too high, because it would end up compromising previous gains.

Hirschman's overarching thesis was that such rhetorics (each did not necessarily have to appear alongside the others in every single argument) did not always express explicitly negative positions. Rather, they were arguments that depicted the ideas they sought to combat in a paradoxical manner, turning the original argument on its head to present it in a negative light.<sup>16</sup> Lévi-Strauss' antimodernity emerged precisely through rhetoric of this type, based – at least, this is my conviction – on his philosophical ultramodernism.

We thus come to the question of cultural diversity and the encounter between cultures. Lévi-Strauss was, like (almost) all anthropologists, a convinced relativist, at least in the sense that for him it was not plausible to suggest one could establish hierarchies of cultural value, if for no other reason than because it was unclear what the definitive frame of reference should be. From this point of view, at least, his famous *Race and History* of 1952 constituted a 'monument' of moral relativism. He reiterated this relativism on multiple occasions, particularly in *Tristes Tropiques*, when he wrote: 'We must accept the fact that each society has made a certain choice, within the range of existing human possibilities, and that the various choices cannot be compared with each other: they are all equally valid [...]. We then discover that no society is fundamentally good, but that none is absolutely bad; they all offer their members certain advantages, with the proviso that there is invariably a residue of evil, the amount of which seems to remain more or less constant' (Lévi-Strauss, 1992a: 385–387).

When it came to the question of contact between diverse cultures, however, Lévi-Strauss' vision lost the optimistic character that had drawn criticism from several directions (Roger Caillois, for example), and assumed an alarmist and, at times, catastrophic tone (Lévi-Strauss, 1955a). It is commonly accepted that the alarm he sounded derived, at least initially, from his negative views of a Western civilization that tended to steamroll all others in its path (Lévi-Strauss 1992a: 406). But at a certain point Lévi-Strauss performed an about-face in his reasoning, even theorizing at one point about the danger inherent in 'excessive' contact between cultures. Recalling the reasoning of various 'antimodernists', including Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790) – of whom he was among other things a very astute reader – Lévi-Strauss overturned his optimistic view of human agency and its potentially positive, if not always intentional,<sup>17</sup> effects, shedding light on its negative and catastrophic consequences. Thus, while the difference between cultures could be synonymous with creativity and innovation, as a product of their reciprocal interaction, whenever cultures intermingled too intensely, their very differences could encourage a dangerous leveling effect. Here, it would seem, Lévi-Strauss employed what Hirschman called the jeopardy thesis. '[T]here is not – there cannot be – a world civilization in the absolute sense which

is sometimes given this term. For civilization implies the coexistence of cultures offering among themselves the maximum of diversity, and even consists in this very coexistence. World civilization could not be anything on the world scale except the coalition of cultures, each preserving its originality' (Lévi-Strauss, 1983c: 358).

Lévi-Strauss declared himself, in fact, to be largely in favor of keeping a certain distance between cultures, which he believed to be a lesser evil compared with indiscriminate miscegenation: for while it was obvious that there could be no growth without interaction, it was equally true that excessive interaction led to the loss of identity and cultural death. The latter theme was already expressed by Gobineau, as well as other French anti-humanists and anti-modernists like de Bonald and Barrès (Compagnon, 2005).

After a certain point, then, contact between cultures became sterile and even counterproductive, in the sense that homogenization meant universalization, which could only be interpreted as a bad sign. Despite Lévi-Strauss' universal, modernist project, the only universality worthy of the name – a product of his ultramodernism – had to be abstract, without a subject, not something concrete like a 'universal' society. Indeed, the universal could not be something that belonged to the realm of experience. It could only belong to the hidden world that determines us, and yet remains 'not visible to us' because, if it were visible – that is, if it were made concrete – all difference would disappear. The disappearance of all difference as a threatening consequence of a dreadful global civilization founded on universalism has a Spenglerian air that implies a criticism of both capitalism and communism, the latter declared to be a 'ruse' of history to encourage the Westernization of all those peoples who had until only very recently been left on its margins (Lévi-Strauss, 1979: 26).<sup>18</sup>

But the paradoxes don't end there. If Lévi-Strauss feared the institution of a world order, he also continually reiterated (in his writings from the 1950s through those of the early 2000s) the need ultimately to take precautionary measures regarding the operation of a global society: demographic growth, the unforeseen consequences of contact between cultures, the deterioration of the natural environment. Lévi-Strauss was an interventionist, and opposed *laissez-faire*; and yet the latter, again paradoxically, made him look very similar to those whom he feared, the supporters of a universal world civilization.

Nothing in Lévi-Strauss, however, seems more 'antimodern' than his reflections on freedom. It was certainly true that Neolithic man, he wrote in *Tristes Tropiques*, 'was no freer than he is today' (Lévi-Strauss, 1992a: 391). Nevertheless, he continued, 'the history of the past twenty thousand years is irrevocable. There is nothing to be done about it now [...]. Mankind has opted for monoculture; it is in the process of creating a mass civilization, a beetroot is grown in the mass. Henceforth, man's daily bill of fare will consist only of this one item' (Lévi-Strauss, 1992a: 38).

It was also true that, as he argued, '[i]n the neolithic period, man knew how to protect himself against cold and hunger; he had achieved leisure in which to think; no doubt there was little he could do against disease, but it is not certain that advances in hygiene have had any other effect than to transfer the responsibility for maintaining demographic equilibrium from epidemics, which were no more dreadful a means than any other, to different phenomena such as widespread famine and wars of extermination' (Lévi-Strauss, 1992a: 391).

So it would seem that the more we have gained, the more we have lost. In the Neolithic, man was no less free than he is today, but today he is not as free as he was then. Is this the futility of human agency? The perverse effects of progress? Pessimism, surely. '[H]is labours, his sorrows, his joys, his hopes and his works', he wrote later on, 'will be as if they had never existed' (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 695).

Lévi-Strauss' positions regarding the question of freedom were further illustrated in an essay he dedicated expressly to this topic (Lévi-Strauss, 1992b). He refuted the idea that one could construct man's right to freedom from his moral nature, because definitions of freedom were different

according to their epoch, and contained varying concrete concepts; freedom was thus relative, while the idea of freedom that emerged in modernity had been imposed beginning from abstract and absolute principles. From his refusal to consider human rights as deriving from man's moral nature, on the one hand, and his relativist concept of freedom, on the other, Lévi-Strauss deduced the need to recognize the rights of mankind up only to the point in which their exercise did not risk compromising the existence of other species. It was necessary to base human rights not on man's moral nature, but on his nature as a living creature.

As for the fate of the universalist doctrine of freedom, Lévi-Strauss believed this would evolve ineluctably toward single-party forms, or toward that 'rampant freedom' under whose influence ideas fought amongst each other until they 'lose all substance'. He then recalled Montesquieu's ironic remark: '[A]fter having been free with laws, one wishes to be free against them' (Lévi-Strauss, 1992b: 285).

The antidote to the idea of abstract freedom, which the Revolution of 1789 had put into circulation along with the other values and ideas that captured the attention of Europe and then the world, was *superstition*.<sup>19</sup> Superstitions are neither the hollow convictions of the overly credulous, nor traditions that like a tangle of *chaînes* impede human beings from finding the path to conscious emancipation. Rather, they are those forms of attachment to 'the multitude of small bonds, of tiny solidarities that prevent the individual from being ground down by the overall society and the latter from being pulverized into anonymous and interchangeable atoms. These links integrate each person into a mode of life, a home ground, a tradition, a form of belief or unbelief' (Lévi-Strauss, 1992b: 287).

It is certainly no coincidence that Lévi-Strauss, in his defense of 'superstitions' as an antidote to the concept of abstract liberty, referred to Edmund Burke and Henry S. Maine. Lévi-Strauss appeared to invert the anthropological creed first embodied by Franz Boas (whom Lévi-Strauss otherwise unconditionally admired), who argued that we would only truly be free when we had broken 'the shackles that tradition has laid upon us' (Boas, 1974: 42). Nevertheless, it is still necessary to understand just what made up these superstitions that Lévi-Strauss spoke of.

If one gives freedom a presumably rational foundation, one condemns it to erode the very 'content' that constitutes its own basis for being. It is its 'irrational foundation', Lévi-Strauss argued, that ensures the survival of freedom: those minute privileges, those ridiculous little inequalities that 'without infringing upon the general equality, allow individuals to find the nearest anchorage. True liberty is that of long habit, of preferences – in a word, of customs' (Lévi-Strauss, 1992b: 287).

At this point, Lévi-Strauss' vision of freedom, of the subject, and of their 'place' in the world undergoes a strange inversion. Was rationality without a subject in fact not preferable to the subject without rationality of the philosophers? Shouldn't the first replace the second? Now his terms appear to switch sides, and freedom appears an artificial and abstract invention lacking a subject. But, just as in societies of relatively small dimensions, freedom could only maintain itself concretely, 'from within', since it could not be constructed 'from without'. Once again the primitives were called upon to confirm the opening of a gap separating us from a human condition against which history, and especially modernity, had struck a potentially fatal blow (Lévi-Strauss, 1992b: 288). Freedom, Lévi-Strauss appears to want to say to us, could never be truly defeated; it could only be lost.

And so we come full circle. The rationalist leap, which impelled Lévi-Strauss toward the search for the universal (what we called his modernism), led him to the levels of invariants and the forms of the universal. But for these invariants and these forms to truly be such, they needed to be understood on a plane beyond historical examples, beyond the invasion of real life: this was his transformation towards ultramodernism.

Faced with the impassivity of the cosmos, of which life is an (albeit ephemeral) expression, one could only seek to reaffirm life itself. This reaffirmation, however, could not be understood

thanks to those very same forms of rationality that threatened to dissolve or restrict it, as he had paradoxically done with Man, ‘stripping him’ of his every conscious or affective impulse (*this is The Naked Man*), but returning to the vision of a world in which the sense of loss, nostalgia, the desire to ‘pause’ and ‘feel at home’ (a genuine *nostos*) were comfort and consolation, however momentary, for the uselessness of the ‘hive-like activity’ of our species. Like the mythical indian, whom he likened himself to – in exemplary fashion – in one of the most famous passages of *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss too had arrived at the world’s edge, and had questioned beings and things only to find disappointment (Lévi-Strauss, 1992a: 41).

## Lévi-Strauss’ antimodernism and its contemporary implications

The result, itself in a certain sense paradoxical, of Lévi-Strauss’ trajectory (from modernism to antimodernism, via ultramodernism), seems to line up with the inward withdrawal of a project that had once been pursued in the name of universality. This ‘antimodernism’ (already written in the *ouverture* of his thought) was connected with ways of being and types of reasoning characteristic of our times.

Among these ways and types there is one that captures both Lévi-Strauss’ relativism as well as his hesitation and confusion when faced with the ever greater intensity of cultural contact in a world held hostage by a ticking demographic time bomb. Returning to a simplistic vision of culture, this type of reasoning transformed the theme of cultural contact into a problem of ‘cultural contamination’. This way of thinking, which in some cases became a truly political reading of Lévi-Strauss – I refer to certain attempts to summarize his thought by the right, particularly in France – had results that Lévi-Strauss himself could not have foreseen, much less intended. The concept of cultures that saw them as isolated and threatened by a growing ‘risk of contamination’ revealed itself in fact to be closely linked with a process of constructing the other as a stranger.<sup>20</sup> Relativism, in its radical form, lent itself to the construction of a process of exclusion based on the assumption of untranslatability, and thus of the fundamental inability to communicate between cultures. As a result the ‘other’ is such so long as it remains in its place, and constitutes the subject of largely reassuring images, like those captured by the gaze of a tourist or an anthropologist; but an ‘other’ becomes a stranger when its presence becomes ‘slimy’, to employ a metaphor from Bauman, who in turn borrowed it from Sartre: that is, an ‘ineliminable other among us’ – as the immigrant appears to many today, a figure that evokes not so much the presence of others among us, but the precariousness of the very concept of ‘us’ itself (Bauman, 1997).<sup>21</sup> There is another style of thought that places the question of freedom at the center. Still, this only apparently follows in the footsteps of the rejection of an abstractly rational concept of freedom prone to evolve into that which Lévi-Strauss himself called ‘rampant freedom’, under whose influence ideas fight amongst themselves until they ‘lose all substance’. Through the claim to restore the freedom and dignity of the ‘individual’ against social and philosophical theories deemed ‘abstract’ and ‘authoritarian’, this style of thought and behavior, which largely cuts across the political and cultural spectrum, centers its own discourse on the concrete individual, with his rights, needs, freedoms, etc., beneath which hides an older understanding which is the product of that ‘abstract’ freedom: *homo oeconomicus*, and all his post-modern, new age avatars. A private individual (and one deprived of his social context) for whom common interests tend to disappear, a ‘flexible’ individual for whom consumption, wellness, and fitness – associated in some cases with the cult of DIY, or ‘do it yourself’ – become forms of recompensation in a public space that is ever less public (for once a paradox not attributable to Lévi-Strauss), but ever more populated by figures similar to those ‘interchangeable, autonomous atoms’ into which, Lévi-Strauss said, society risked pulverizing itself through a poorly understood ‘excess of freedom’.

These two styles of thought and forms of behavior which we have just outlined – to which one could add those one finds in discourses on the environment, gender, demographics, animal rights, primitivists, and more besides – tell us that these are now the uncertain, shifting crest of a wave upon which ride requests for recognition and/or autonomy or, to the contrary, for the negation and/or suppression of any difference. In the light of these styles of thought, forms of behavior, and modes of ‘feeling’ different cultures, nature, society, the world, the individual, the ‘person’, Lévi-Strauss’ antimodernism is today, *malgré lui*, surprisingly relevant.

Translated from the Italian by Richard R. Nybakken

## Notes

1. ‘Traveling, the ethnographer – unlike the self-proclaimed explorer or tourist – puts his own place in the world on the line, and crosses the threshold. He doesn’t move between the land of the savage and that of the civilized: in whatever direction he goes, he returns among the dead. Submitting his own traditions and beliefs to the test of social experiences completely foreign to him, performing an autopsy on his own society, he is truly dead to his world; and if he happens to make it back, after having recomposed the dismembered limbs of his own culture, he will always be one who was resurrected. The others, the mass of pusillanimous cowards and housewives, will regard this Lazarus with a mixture of sentiments in which jealously competes with terror. Or, better, it is they who will debate among themselves over an insoluble contradiction: They will be jealous of the secret wisdom that he acquired at such high cost; they will beg him for crumbs of this wisdom; but they will never forgive him their weakness and his strength, which forces them to confront the terrible evidence of their own humanity’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1955a: 1217).
2. A dichotomy that seems more than anything to have been built around his well-known critique of Malinowski, which, in turn, seems to have served as a trampoline for the postmodern attack on so-called ‘positivist’ anthropology.
3. From the early 1950s – for example, in ‘Panorama of Ethnology (1950–1952)’, originally published in *Diogenes* in 1953 – Lévi-Strauss insisted on portraying ethnology as the study of ‘primitive peoples’. It would be difficult for a similar definition to find widespread acceptance today, but with the expression ‘primitive peoples’ Lévi-Strauss sought to reaffirm his conviction, drawn as much from Durkheim as from Mauss, that the simplest societies in terms of technological advancement were also those in which ‘social factors’ could be perceived in their most ‘elementary’ state. Behind the expression ‘primitive peoples’, then, is a move explicitly designed, paradoxically (in fine Lévi-Straussian fashion) to situate anthropology at the center of what might initially be seen as a rather improbable effort at ‘reform’ of the human sciences. A paradoxical move, with improbable consequences: How could the human sciences in fact be reformed by a discipline that concerned itself with ‘primitive peoples’? Could ethnology – the ‘rag picker’ of the human sciences, as he called it – aspire to such a grand role while concerning itself ‘only’ with tiny bands of people out in the middle of the rainforest or the desert? The answer was clear: Since ethnology had privileged access to the ‘elementary forms’ of human culture – those elementary forms that hid themselves in the garbage discarded by other, more prestigious and widely accepted human sciences, which had no idea what to do with these ‘rags’ (myth, ritual, drawing, song, bizarre marriage customs, a list of clan names...) – it was the discipline that more than any other could draw out the fundamentals of man’s social and cultural life, remaining true to its original purpose: to continue to uncover hidden or garbled fragments of ‘human facts’ (rags) and to organize them into neat and intelligible patterns.
4. As well as Leibniz, as Todorov has noted: ‘From the observation of particular facts, one deduces general properties in such a way that each fact appears to be one combination – among various possible combinations – of these general and elementary features’ (Todorov, 1993: 62). But lurking underneath is Rousseau, who Lévi-Strauss would cite repeatedly: ‘When one wants to study men, one must look around oneself; but to study man, one must first learn to look into the distance; one must first see differences in order to discover characteristics’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1983b: 35). It is on this basis that Lévi-Strauss could argue that anthropology is a discipline that seeks to construct a ‘general inventory of societies’ where the observable techniques are ‘the equivalents of so many choices, from all the possible ones which each society seems to make’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1983a: 11).

5. Structure is an ‘empty category’ of the human mind. Thought works according to binary oppositions between terms like high and low, left and right, raw and cooked, light and dark, etc. These oppositions have no content of their own – hence they are ‘empty’ – yet they organize the world of natural and social experiences, making these experiences the subject of reflection and action. Meaning derives from the relationship that the mind constantly assigns to these relationships, while the job of the anthropologist is to break through the surface of appearances and perceive the unconscious models that reveal these structures. ‘[T]he transition from nature to culture’, Lévi-Strauss wrote in 1949, ‘is determined by man’s ability to think of biological relationships as systems of oppositions [...]. But perhaps it must be acknowledged that duality, alternation, opposition and symmetry, whether presented in definite forms or in imprecise forms, are not so much matters to be explained, as basic and immediate data of mental and social reality which should be the starting-point of any attempt at explanation’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1969: 136).
6. Whether the unconscious is that of a ‘primitive’ or of the anthropologist is irrelevant. A fundamental identity of structures leads the two universes to communicate, as one might infer from a passage written by Lévi-Strauss in 1950. Here the reference is to the linguistics he encountered during his years in the United States (1941–1948), which – thanks above all to Roman Jakobson – became for Lévi-Strauss a sort of ‘epistemological model’ of reference: ‘[I]t is linguistics and most particularly structural linguistics, which has since familiarized us with the idea that the fundamental phenomena of mental life, the phenomena that condition it and determine its most general forms, are located on the plane of unconscious thinking. The unconscious would thus be the mediating term between self and others. Going down into the givens of the unconscious, the extension of our understanding, if I may put it thus, is not a movement towards ourselves; we reach a level which seems strange to us, not because it harbours our most secret self, but (much more normally) because, without requiring us to move outside ourselves, it enables us to coincide with forms of activity which are both at once *ours* and *other*: which are the condition of all the forms of mental life of all men at all times’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1987: 35).
7. See also Lévi-Strauss and Éribon (1991: 114–115).
8. This is the prevalent interpretation of *Tristes Tropiques* in, among others, Moravia (1969).
9. In *Structural Anthropology*, Lévi-Strauss would put forward an image of ethnography as a practice distinct from anthropology, not problematizing the concept of the ‘fusion of horizons’ that is, however, central to interpretive anthropology.
10. At this point Lévi-Strauss’ position betrays another paradox. On the one hand it is in ‘simple’ societies – those ‘most distant from our own’ – that we can trace the ‘facts of general functioning’ (Marcel Mauss) of human societies. Primitive societies are thus the doorway to ascend (or descend) to unconscious structures. But on the other, the simplicity that makes these societies so distant from our own is not related, Lévi-Strauss clarifies, to a dynamic in human history seen as dependent on evolutionary laws. Divided between ‘cold’ or static societies and ‘hot’ or mobile societies as in the West, India, China, and the Arab world, primitive societies seem to constitute a useful fiction not dissimilar to that of the ‘state of nature’ in Rousseau, whom Lévi-Strauss frequently refers to as ‘the most anthropological of philosophers’. But while Rousseau identified the state of nature as a point of rhetorical support thanks to which he was more easily able to develop his argument, Lévi-Strauss represents the ‘primitives’ as the very condition by which ethnology itself can find those elements that allow it to aspire to become not just a discipline, but the foundation of a much vaster ‘science of man’.
11. ‘The fact is that these primitive peoples, the briefest contact with whom can sanctify the traveler [...] are all, in their different ways, enemies of our society, which pretends to itself that it is investing them with nobility at the very time when it is completing their destruction [...]. The savages of the Amazonian forest are sensitive and powerless victims, pathetic creatures caught in the toils of mechanized civilization, and I can resign myself to understanding the fate which is destroying them; but I refuse to be the dupe of a kind of magic which is still more feeble than their own, and which brandishes before an eager public albums of coloured photographs, instead of the now vanished native masks. Perhaps the public imagines that the charms of the savages can be appropriated through the medium of these photographs. Not content with having eliminated savage life, and unaware even of having done so, it feels the need feverishly to appease the nostalgic cannibalism of history with the shadows of those that history has already destroyed’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1992a: 41).

12. '[...] the reality of being, which man senses at the deepest level as being alone capable of giving a reason and a meaning to his daily activities, his moral and emotional life, his political options, his involvement in the social and the natural worlds, his practical endeavours and his scientific achievements; the other is the reality of non-being, awareness of which inseparably accompanies the sense of being, since man has to live and struggle, think, believe and above all, preserve his courage, although he can never at any moment lose sight of the opposite certainty that he was not present on earth in former times, that he will not always be here in the future and that, with his inevitable disappearance from the surface of a planet which is itself doomed to die, his labours, his sorrows, his joys, his hopes and his works will be as if they had never existed, since no consciousness will survive to preserve even the memory of these ephemeral phenomena, only a few features of which, soon to be erased from the impassive face of the earth, will remain as already cancelled evidence that they once were, and were as nothing' (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 694–695). A passage that seems to echo the tone of Giacomo Leopardi's *Song of the Great Wild Rooster* (*Cantico del gallo silvestre*), in *Operette Morali* (1824): 'And just as of very great human kingdoms and empires and of their marvelous exploits, which were so very famous in other ages, there remains no sign of fame whatsoever; so too of the entire world, and of the infinite vicissitudes and calamities of all created things, no single trace will remain; but a naked silence and a most profound quiet will fill the immensity of space. Thus, this stupendous and frightening mystery of universal existence, before it can be declared or understood, will vanish and be lost.'
13. The same idea comes up in Lévi-Strauss and Éribon, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*. Marxist ideology, in its communist and totalitarian iterations, was for Lévi-Strauss nothing other than 'a ruse of history to promote the accelerated Westernization of peoples who have remained on the outside until very recent times' (cited in Todorov, 1993: 68).
14. The Enlightenment was also deemed, by the 'Enlightened' Lévi-Strauss, to be responsible for the totalitarian errors of the contemporary world.
15. '[This] is to take at face value what was only propaganda: an attempt, most often a clumsy one, to replaster the façade of a building constructed for quite a different purpose' (Todorov, 1993: 68–69).
16. These rhetorics are not very far from what Pierre-André Taguieff called those of 'retaliation', with which they shared a certain 'family resemblance'. By appropriating the assumptions behind anti-racism (respect for identities other than one's own, protection of the rights of the different), cultural and differentialist neo-racism deploys a reappropriation, a diversion, and an inversion of their adversary's arguments to produce a self-legitimizing effect for themselves while delegitimizing others. By making the protection of difference their own, for example, neo-racism has successfully introduced the denial of this very principle. Heterophilia thus becomes heterophobia (Taguieff, 2001). How? The discourse of neo-racist politicians is full of arguments like: 'The people must preserve and cultivate their differences [...]. Immigration must be condemned when it attacks the cultural identity of those who welcome it as well as that of the immigrant'. Or again: 'Peoples cannot be considered superior or inferior, they are different. And one must keep these physical and cultural differences in mind' (from an article by P. Pascal and a speech by J.-M. Le Pen, then head of the *Front National Français*, cited in Taguieff, 1991: 51).
17. This idea was typical of the Scottish Enlightenment tradition of the eighteenth century, and would have been familiar to Burke himself.
18. See note 13. On this point, Lévi-Strauss' anti-humanist and anti-Enlightenment critique touches upon the anti-universalist critique of certain Marxist theorists, for whom universalism appears as an ideology that works in the service of capitalist expansion, which has simultaneously operated for many years as a sort of 'Trojan horse', the gift of the capitalist world to the peoples of the 'underdeveloped' nations. Today, it would not be inappropriate to perceive analogies between this vision and that developed by the anti-globalization movement.
19. Lévi-Strauss and Éribon (1991: 117): '[O]ne may wonder if the catastrophes that have struck the West may also find their origin there' [in the Revolution of 1789].
20. On the entwining of these themes with discourses on multiculturalism, racism, and anti-racism in France, where Lévi-Strauss' ideas have had their greatest impact, see Taguieff (ed., 1991; 2001) and Amselle (2001).

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