

## Claude Lévi-Strauss

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Claude Lévi-Strauss was born on November 8, 1908 in Brussels and raised in Paris where his father worked as a painter. His upbringing in a secular Jewish family passionate for art gave him access to books, museums, flea markets, art galleries and operas. As a child, he learned how to paint, played the violin and dreamt of becoming a composer. During his years at the *lycée*, Lévi-Strauss became fascinated by geology, read Freud as soon as his books are translated in French and was introduced by a family friend to the socialist movement and the works of Marx. In these three early intellectual interests, he found rational explanations for the seemingly illogical phenomena underlying the earth, the mind and society. Lévi-Strauss passed the *agrégation* of philosophy in 1931 and became a high school teacher in Mont-de-Marsan. But, his desire to apply philosophical knowledge and thirst for new discoveries made him decide to become an ethnologist.

In 1934, he was offered a position as a Sociology professor on a French university mission to Brazil. Before embarking on the 20-day boat trip from Marseilles, he read, what would become standards for his own research, Robert Lowie, Franz Boas and Alfred Kroeber. At the end of his first academic year in São Paulo in 1935, Lévi-Strauss set out on a four-month expedition to the Caduveo and Bororo tribes. Three years later, a longer expedition sponsored by the *Musée de l'Homme* allowed him to spend almost one year in the Mato Grosso with the Nambikwara, Munde and Tupi-Kawahib tribes. He returned to Paris with his ethnographic material in March 1939 but was immediately sent to the front at the start of World War II. Lévi-Strauss managed to escape to southern France before the invasion of the German army. However, after the Statute on Jews was adopted in October 1940, he lost his French citizenship and any chance of finding a teaching job. In addition, his demand for a visa to return to Brazil was denied.

Promised to a brilliant career in his own country, Lévi-Strauss found refuge in the United States. With the help of Alfred Métraux, Robert Lowie and his aunt Aline Caro-Delville in New York, the New School for Social Research (recently opened by the Rockefeller foundation) invited him to teach a course on South America. He would stay from 1941 to 1947 bringing with him the notes and diaries, photographs and maps collected in Brazil used to finish a classic ethnographic report and formal analysis of his earlier expeditions' results (1948). He also spent much time in the New York Public Library collecting information on kinship systems. In addition, he met American anthropologists such as Boas, Kroeber, Linton, Benedict, Mead, and became the friend and colleague of other exiled intellectuals like the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson, whose structural linguistics offered Lévi-Strauss the general inspiration for the analysis of his ethnographic data.

As Jakobson did with languages, in order to go beyond the simple accumulation of facts, Lévi-Strauss examined kinship as a set of relations. Having adopted this model, he completed his thesis in February 1947 and defended it a few months later upon his return to France. The results of his labor would be published as *Les structures élémentaires de*

*la parenté* (1949), which, if recognized by some as a reference work, was criticized, especially within French academia, as too ambitious. Lévi-Strauss' book did offer an encompassing methodology to scientifically examine family organization. Rather than focusing on the relationship between family members itself, he considered the logical structures underlying them. The methodological direction Lévi-Strauss embarked upon in the 1940s would lead, less than two decades later, to the publication of *Anthropologie structurale* (1958); a collection of articles written in the 1950s investigating kinship, myths, magic and art. Extending beyond the disciplinary boundaries of Anthropology, this manifesto of Structuralism would have a lasting influence in all fields within the Social Sciences and Humanities during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

While considered by some as his least “scientific” work, *Tristes tropiques* (1955), a memoir of the anthropologist's travels combining personal recollections, ethnographic insights and philosophical meditations, has brought Lévi-Strauss the most public recognition. In this autobiographical account, he revealed a critique of western civilization and its associated destructive forces. In 1952, Lévi-Strauss was asked by the UNESCO to write *Race et histoire*. Here again, the author critically examined the supposed benefits of such taken-for-granted notions as social evolution, technological progress and cultural diversity. The 1950s also marked a transition in Lévi-Strauss' teachings from kinship to mythology. He published the four-volume *Mythologiques*, which follows a single myth in all of its variations from South to North America. Again, rather than focusing on the content of the stories themselves, he examined the underlying structures and relations between their different elements starting with the opposition between raw and cooked (1964). In *La voie des masques* (1975), Lévi-Strauss adapted this structural framework to consider the stylistic differences among Native American masks made in the Pacific Northwest.

Among the many honors received during his lifetime, Lévi-Strauss was elected to the *Collège de France* in 1959 and entered the *Académie Française* in 1974. After retiring from the *Collège* on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1982 (50 years to the day after beginning his first job in Mont-de-Marsan), Lévi-Strauss remained active publishing *La potière jalouse* (1985), a critique of Freudian interpretations of myths, and *Histoire de lynx* (1991), deploring the human and environmental catastrophes brought on by western colonialism. He also spent time travelling and gave many interviews to journalists. In *De près et de loin*, a book based on a series of conversation between Didier Eribon and Lévi-Strauss, approaching his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, the anthropologist reiterated the paradox behind some of his philosophical views; a pessimistic diagnosis of the destructive power of modern, western societies associated with an imperturbable faith in the totalizing power of science to understand cultural and natural phenomena. Claude Lévi-Strauss passed away in Paris on October 30, 2009 at the age of 101.

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