

Diving deeper in social structures via levi-strauss



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Claude Levi-Strauss was a Belgium born French anthropologist and ethnologist who is considered the father of structuralism. Structuralism rose in popularity because of a need to make philosophy more scientific, a way to make it rooted in the real world and not so much in the world of metaphysics and abstraction. At its roots, structuralism was a linguistics movement in which a study of language would be conducted in order to break down speech into units and organize those units into pairs. By doing thus one would be able to break down at its core types of relationships. According to Strauss structuralism includes a huge range of social phenomena. What exactly was Strauss' idea of structuralism and to what extent could it be used; does it have any utility when it comes to how historians perceive history? Strauss argued for the idea that a savage mind and a civilized mind work upon the same structures, that the idea of human characteristics are fundamentally the same throughout the world. This paper therefore looks deeper into Strauss's social structures and his concept of structuralism.

What exactly is Structuralism? Simply stated, it is a form of thought that tries to explain how common knowledge allows people to navigate the social world around them and how that world is full of patterns and structures and that those patterns are reproduced by the circulation of narratives and rules within every culture around the world. Structuralism on the social scale can be achieved through myths, kinship relations, and of course language.

Language is a foundation of a culture; it distinguishes a group of people from one another. Whether it is a primitive culture in the Amazon Basin or high society in Europe language is an important part of peoples lives, it is what

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differentiates us from our closest cousins the primates. Many have argued it is language that separates man from animal, but language is so much more than just the simple means of communicating with others. It is at its heart an inseparable part of one's culture. In this regard though it too isn't just an element of one's culture, but also a type of structure in culture that also has different components that make it up. One of these components that make up language is speech, by constructing different speech systems one ends up with the language structure. It is not just simply the spoken word that makes up human language though. There are other forms of what Strauss would consider language, one such form would be myths, while not exactly language it is definitely according to him a type of language.

In 1952 Strauss wrote *The Structural Study of Myth* in which he took Structuralism and applied it to the mythology showing that all myths throughout history, no matter the culture could be structured along binary lines. Myths like language has a fundamental role in any culture, it lays the foundation for a society's origins. These tales are normally closely tied to religion or spirituality and try to explain how a society's institutions, taboos and customs were established. So, it is not surprising that Levi-Strauss should say that myth is language, in this assumption he lays claim to the notion that one can look at myth the same way one looks at language and also break them down into structures the same way. For him myth was a language because one had to speak it at some point for it to even exist. He says, " Myth is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at taking off from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling." [1] But how does one break down myth? Strauss

claims that myth has three main parts that build its structure. Meaning, composition, and function. For Strauss the meaning behind the myth is not simply isolated within the fundamental parts. It is instead found in the composition of all of the parts of the myth. Within the myth he asserts that language functions on a higher plane than within any other linguistic expression. From these claims then he concludes that myth may be able to be broken down into basic units, and from these basic units one is able to summarize they are different from the units of language and yet are still a form of language. The simplest way to explain is that the content of the myth maybe anything and will differentiate between cultures substantially, but the structure of the myth is the same the world over because every myth is simply a sum of the same parts. For Strauss myth was linked to ritual and ritual and other similar forms of social acts was a symbolic form of communication and existed outside of the norm and was something that people innately had in their biology no matter where they may have originated.

Another aspect of Levi-Strauss' Social Structures was the kinship relations, Strauss argued that tribal kinship groups normally were found in pairs or in some instances in groups that were both opposed to each other and yet linked together in some form or fashion. One of the ways he backed this thought up was in the example that he had observed how people categorized trees and animals based on oppositions as well as his time in the Amazon among indigenous tribes there. Humans for whatever reason seemed to work on an opposite scale, hot and cold, good and evil, night and day, friend or foe. He argued that for a person to understand one, that must have

experienced the other. For Strauss the individual cognitive structure had direct influence on social structures. He assumed three fundamental properties of the human mind, the act of giving and receiving bound the participants in a form of a social relationship, people innately follow rules, and reciprocity is the easiest way to start a social relationship.[2]He discovered in his research that there was a wide range of cultures that had no history of being in contact with each other and yet they all seemed to have rules about who one could not and could marry. From these studies Strauss came up with a kinship system in which there were three structures, elementary, semi-complex, and complex. The elementary structures are based on rules that specify whom a person must marry while the complex systems focus on the negative marriage rules which mean who a person can not marry. The semi-complex structure is a mixture of the complex and elementary systems. What is even more interesting is the thought behind how these structures formed, what caused these structures to be put into motion? Why did humans fundamentally shy away from certain things that would be considered taboo? Why were there certain things that through the world from every culture even when not linked historically were the same? This notion that human shared certain thoughts biology was at the root of Strauss' social structure. For Strauss, kinship structure was based on marriage and not descent. His aim was to understand the origin of human culture and where the origin of the kinship categories began.

For Strauss social structures were the logic behind reality, that empirical truths were built around the social structures. For him the structures were intertwined and existed within each other, one could not go away or be

changed without affecting all the others. He insisted that there were universal structures that connected all people and cultures together, that there was something in our very biology that made us think and act on some fundamental way the same as other cultures. That our myths may differ in content but at their core they are a form of language and therefore they fit into a certain type of mold. As Strauss pointed out if myths were not spoken then they would not exist, that he argued was a form of language. Social structures could not very well exist without the most basic form of social interaction, that of kinship structures. It is through these ties that social interactions take place and societies grow and evolve over time into cultures. For Strauss there are distinct kinship structures within the social structure and surprisingly he found that throughout the world, cultures that had not historical connections still shared certain beliefs and practices further giving credence to his belief that there is something in our very makeup that ties people together in the most fundamental way. There are such things as universal human truths, things that tie all humans together by the very virtue of being human and these truths

Bibliography

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[1]Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology* . Trans. Claire Jacobson. New York: Basic Books, 1963. P. 210

[2]Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Trans. Claire Jacobson. New York: Basic Books, 1963

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