

Back to the *Tristes Tropiques*: Notes on Lévi-Strauss and Brazil

Roberto DaMatta

Translated by Noël de Souza

Revised by Mark Streeter

I can't really say how Claude Lévi-Strauss' work is viewed in Brazil. This would take more than a few pages; nor do I have that enviable propensity of some colleagues, whose careers are entirely dedicated to cutting, snipping and putting together what they call the "intellectual field." I'm not cut out to be a tailor of values, just as I'm not too keen on the topography or archeology of mental life. I am indeed intuitive and am aware that in general Lévi-Strauss' work enjoys great prestige in the Brazilian intellectual world. But there does exist, the structuralists know, a revealing and obvious relationship between his work and the tropics. It so happens that social prestige and the ritualization of his ideas are inversely proportional to the critical reading of his work. Thus, his work is seen through a prism of untouchability, like the gods on Olympus: that region situated somewhat between "Rue des Écoles" and "Boulevard Saint Michel," that magic area where the true "mythologiques" happen. It is there that, in the minds of many Brazilian intellectuals, the gods reside. But it is here, between the beach full of bodies tanned by the sun of our cheerful tropical summer and the constant and stern drizzle of the "avenida Paulista," that these gods are welcomed by their idolaters, discussed by their oracles and symbolically sacrificed by their enemies.

In the universe of the *tristes tropiques*, even today we have this endless ritual of succession of god-intellectuals who, emerging one after another, recreate in native lands, and through their exclusive representatives, the academic dynamics of the sacred places. And all of this happens in spaces as suspicious as a bar in "Baixo Leblon"— in Rio de Janeiro—, an unknown

restaurant in Niterói or a fashionable tavern in São Paulo. It is actually, as Lévi-Strauss himself pointed out (in a famous passage for the inhabitants of the *tristes tropiques*), a universe fascinated by hierarchy, by ideas that cannot be fully understood and, especially, by a vague commitment to the authors being discussed. This commitment, as I'll explain later on, has nothing to do with the application or professional and concrete use of their ideas but is closely related to the waves of prestige that such ideas carry. Besides, this truly symbolic kinship is yet to be duly studied. It is a kinship built with books, essays and articles coming to us from Paris in the shape of newfound ideas; and its parentage makes the brilliant thesis, the happy discourse, the victory of the new and suddenly soaring flight of a new star in the literary and social firmament all possible.

In the *tristes tropiques*, the ideas that come from within are like undesired emotions—a chest pain that hopefully will soon disappear and about which one does not need to bother much. But when the ideas come from without, everything changes. They immediately lull us to sleep and keep us safe, like a canopy under which, henceforth, such and such a problem is definitively presented or merely resolved. And these ideas obviously obtain immediate success, although one never really knows what the author is talking about. I only realized this a few years ago when I did a *structural analysis of the quotations* in the dissertations and books written in Brazil and tried to situate foreign colleagues vis-à-vis national ones. The foreigner was always a sort of “ancestor,” whereas the Brazilian was viewed with ambivalence and opposition. Foreign bibliographic reference replaces national bibliography. The result is a perfect mythological series, thanks to the general inability to discuss the genealogy of any major problematic in the field of human sciences.

We are, then, left with an embarrassing alternative: either the foreigners made it all up or the Brazilians copied everything. And nobody has ever succeeded in establishing any intelligent middle ground. The immediate concrete fact is that in Brazil a quotation is used like a totem, something that at once grants legitimacy and, with it, intellectual identity. Therefore, the reversal of an author's work takes place in the tropics. It so happens that it always begins at the end. Just like a film running backwards, you see the last images and only after a great deal of time—and, sometimes never—do you discover and read the early works of the author. As with Lévi-Strauss in Brazil, for instance, it is worth stressing that the translation of *Structural Anthropology* dates back to 1967, whereas that of the *Elementary Structures of*

Kinship, Lévi-Strauss' second book, dates from only 1976. By the same token, even today no thought is given to publishing his early ethnographic essays on the Bororo and the Nambikwara. In this case, we've got the film rewound halfway, since there is no more talk about publishing the *Mythologiques*, which clearly mark a critical stage of the author's thinking, especially since they form a kind of concrete application of his perspective to a complex and heterogeneous collection of ethnographic data. And this undoubtedly explains the nonsense we may read in some anthologies of structuralist texts published in Brazil, where, in the course of the work matrilinear is mistaken for matrilateral and parallel with cross-cousins!

All of this, however, does have a name, which typifies the arrival of any original and deeply innovative work—as is the case with Claude Lévi-Strauss' anthropology—in the *tristes tropiques*. It so happens that the works turn up without flesh. Divorced right away from the concrete human beings that have created them, coming as distant echoes of an academic milieu whose rules, values, mediocrity and daily life are unknown, the ideas hit us as truth's revelation: words without mouth or face, texts divinized by the most utter and complete lack of contextualization. Thus, it is odd to see that we have to leave the West in order to be able to speak of *mana orenda* and witchcraft, when in actual fact we know so well this charm, this glamour, and this *charisma* which come along with the text that is (reportedly) revolutionizing Paris and becoming a must (nothing more truly magical than this noun) for a "civilized" intellectual life. This is where the myth of the *mythologiques* lies!

This is then the overall picture of the tropics. But with Lévi-Strauss and Brazil things are complicated. He became known to Brazilians far before he became the Lévi-Strauss of the theories of kinship and of the savage mind; before he became the producer of a work that succeeded brilliantly at synthesizing the best of Anglo-Saxon social anthropology (such as the most original productions of North American Boasian culturalism), and the best of Roman Jakobson's linguistics with the great revolutionary roots of Durkheim and Mauss; an intellectual who had the intuition and courage to take the thinking of tribal groups that he studied seriously, seeing them as being on the same level as some of our most sophisticated literary and philosophical works.

It may be said that there are two moments in the presence of Lévi-Strauss in Brazil. In the first, he is one of us, working as a teacher at the newly

founded Universidade de São Paulo, discovering with fascination a Brazilian land teeming with social, political, urban and cultural facts likely to spin the head of any observer keen on capitalizing on the social experience as critical data for any intellectual experience—an innovative attitude which only Boas' and Malinowski's social anthropology had, at that time, succeeded in developing. Here again it was Lévi-Strauss who coordinated a large expedition to Central Brazil. It was a trip that earned him a varied bureaucratic and sociological experience as well as an association with the National Museum. And in this institution, he met Luiz de Castro Faria.¹ I don't need to say that this phase has been described in *Tristes Tropiques*—which makes this anthropological exercise of combining the practical with the intellect, form with content, simply fascinating and courageous. Of this early moment there still remains a photograph, which Castro Faria so generously let me have.² In it one can see the patio of the Museu Nacional do Rio de Janeiro in March 1939, a young Lévi-Strauss in the company of American (Charles Wagley and Ruth Landis) and Brazilian colleagues. It was in that photograph that I saw, for the very first time in my life, an embodied Claude Lévi-Strauss. This very same picture also conveys the great metaphor of the intellectual life of our *tristes tropiques*. Allow me then to study it “structurally” to show the encounter between the Lévi-Strauss of the second phase in Brazil with that of the first. The photograph tells us more about this meeting than the merely intellectual specification of Lévi-Strauss' second moment in Brazil.

What do we find? First, the cast of characters. All foreigners are to the right of the Museum's Director, Dona Heloísa Alberto Torres, the only person wearing black, with a long necklace and carrying a briefcase in her right hand—the hand of justice, rule and control. Her white hair and broad, open smile likewise provide a stunning contrast with the seriousness of the foreigners, as opposed to the apparently happier faces of the Brazilians Luiz de Castro Faria, Raimundo Lopes and Édison Carneiro, all standing to the left of Dona Heloísa. Yet another striking detail is that the Museum's Director, like the institution she runs itself, stands in the middle—a mediator between the foreign and national researchers, who often find themselves in different and opposing camps. In this regard, it is worth stressing the positions of Lévi-Strauss and Édison Carneiro in the picture. Both are most formally dressed. Charles Wagley wears something rather sporty and American, while the Brazilian colleagues of the Museum (Castro Faria and

Raimundo Lopes) have on their white aprons typical of “naturalist anthropologists,” showing that, after all, they work in a museum—that place dedicated to studies of natural history, “natural populations” in that old sense that Lévi-Strauss’ work has so helped to demolish. Today, thanks to structuralism, we know that there are no “natural peoples” studied by naturalists or “civilized peoples” studied by historians.

Furthermore, one of the impacts in Brazil of Lévi-Strauss’ work (or of the Lévi-Strauss in his second phase in Brazil) was the upheaval his ideas caused in the reified concept of time as history and of history as the single scientific measure of the study of man. Rather, Lévi-Strauss defended the idea—especially in *Totemism Today* and in *The Savage Mind*—that there can be as many histories as we wish, and that it is impossible to have a total “history,” since it is necessary to be both oblivious and reminiscent of events in order for history to exist. This has caused serious problems in an intellectual environment dominated by the evolutionist linearity of a bureaucratized and almost always crass Marxism.

Likewise, it was Lévi-Strauss’ work that made the development of a new approach to “Indigenous peoples” possible when he introduced another type of measurement between them and us. Prior to structuralism, tribal studies were the fruit of cultural contact and acculturation. It was within the context of a research project developed at the Museu Nacional by Harvard University, with David Maybury-Lewis at Harvard and Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira in Brazil, that various books emerged on the Gê language groups of Central Brazil, among them the Kayapó, the Krahó, the Krikati, the Apinayé and also the Bororo. According to this new perspective, we were able to study the tribal societies as structures that transformed in space, without falling prey to a comfortable, demagogic and repetitive evolutionism such as that of Leslie Whyte, which is typical of Darcy Ribeiro’s studies. But that’s not all...

It so happens that Édison Carneiro and Lévi-Strauss also contrast in terms of skin color in the photograph. The most European is located in spatial opposition to the most Brazilian. It is also impressive to note that this spatial difference emerges in the work of both of them. In that of Édison Carneiro, who became one of the most important scholars of Brazilian folklore, a certain theoretical ingenuity comes across and so does an enormous care lavished on the mass of data described and discovered during his research work. His work takes us within Brazil. With Claude Lévi-Strauss, however, it’s what one already knows. The particular gains universal stature when the

facts are placed in relational equations that link them in a chain with a theory that is inevitably all-encompassing and vertiginous. But wouldn't this be what is revealed by the positions of the subjects in this picture? Also, the closer one is to one's "center," the more one is concerned with the Brazilian society, as is reflected in Castro Faria, Ruth Landis or Charles Wagley. The "margins," predominantly more eclectic, are more radical than the center. And lastly, it remains to be suggested that in this photograph, Lévi-Strauss gives the impression of wanting to leave, as he did later on in his work and in his "savage thinking," which revealed a new way of looking at the *tristes tropiques*. Furthermore, there is nothing more visible in the photograph than the great Lévi-Straussian dichotomy between *nature* and *nurture*, since the characters are almost absorbed by the trees that form the entire background of the photograph. But between *nature* and *nurture*, what is it that exists? A look at the portraits affords a glimpse of yet another image quite consistent with Lévi-Strauss's concepts. I'm thinking of that wrought-iron grille that so clearly stands between the people and the trees and, in so doing, suggests how they would survive in and where they would pose for posterity.

Today we can say that this photograph, so "revealing," gives hopes for a greater integration between "foreign" and "Brazilian" anthropologists, as well as for a Claude Lévi-Strauss who is the human remembrance of the Lévi-Strauss of the *mythologiques* and the masks. Wouldn't this definitive dissolution of all possible oppositions then be the true message of structuralism?

Notes

¹ See Luiz de Castro Faria, "A Antropologia no Brasil." In this major essay, Faria recalls and recovers that phase. Part of that experience is also recalled by Prof. Egon Schaden's essay in the same *Anuário Antropológico*.

² See the photograph on page 537.

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Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ruth Landis, Charles Wagley, Heloisa Alberto Torres, Luiz de Castro Faria, Raimundo Lopes and Edison Carneiro.

March 1939

Photograph

Museu Nacional (Rio de Janeiro)

