

Critique of Structuralism in the System of Claude Lévi-Strauss

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Abstract:

In the contemporary era, structuralism has emerged as a predominant doctrine, securing a prominent foothold within scientific and academic realms and igniting extensive intellectual and cultural discourses worldwide. It has introduced groundbreaking perspectives on the human condition, language, and societal structures. Claude Lévi-Strauss, an instrumental figure in the propagation and intellectual advancement of structuralism, made significant contributions in two principal areas: firstly, through a rigorous internal critique of structuralism itself, and secondly, by endeavoring to establish a pure structuralist model adept at interpreting scientific, cultural, and social phenomena reliably.

This study delves into Lévi-Strauss's structuralist propensities, accentuating his most recent research contributions and critically scrutinizing the general structuralist perspectives, particularly the insights and results emanating from Lévi-Strauss's endeavors.

Keywords: Critique of Structuralism; Antropology; language; Claude Lévi-Strauss.

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INTRODUCTION

Among the myriad approaches to structuralism, numerous concepts have been sequestered within a general yet restrictive framework, lacking in-depth discourse for their interpretation, analysis, deconstruction, critique, and subsequent extraction of results and methodological identification.

This research initiative aims to invigorate the debate on structuralism, shedding light on one of its most seminal figures, Claude Lévi-Strauss. He is particularly esteemed for presenting a model derived from his interpretation of historical, mythical, linguistic, and even human relational histories. Building on these foundational elements, the study endeavors to comprehend Lévi-Strauss's project as a critical and pioneering effort to rejuvenate classical structuralism. It queries whether Lévi-Strauss's structuralism project represents a methodologically and anthropologically cohesive model in terms of its conception and structure.

1. The Intellectual and Historical Reference of Structuralism

Structuralism did not evolve in a vacuum; it was profoundly influenced by endeavors to transcend conventional thought and establish a paradigm aligned with the evolution of human, knowledge, and scientific movements. Thus, it intersects with theories concerning societal conditions.

Given its various proponents who fortify its scientific and linguistic methodological presence capable of encapsulating the overarching narrative of knowledge and text, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) emerges as a pivotal figure meriting serious and robust discourse.

With Lévi-Strauss at the helm, structuralism resonated with the French societal outlook, wherein the voice of French socialists ascended concurrently with the dissolution of existentialist views, which ceased to serve as a holistic philosophy guiding societal structure, culture, and even aspirations towards achieving harmony and balance.

This rift between existential and structural theories sometimes verged on intellectual antagonism, frequently provoking exchanges

and critiques between Lévi-Strauss and Jean-Paul Sartre. While Sartre's existential theory (1905-1980), inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900) hierarchical notions, Lévi-Strauss's structuralism focused on developing concepts from Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), aligning well with Lévi-Strauss's intellectual upbringing and social background, and emphasizing a holistic social understanding of societal elements. (Yateem, 2019, p. 120)

Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, deeply linked to Durkheim and Mauss's sociological tenets, marked a departure from philosophical and social research that traditionally eschewed a theoretical dimension of human and social sciences. In essence, it laid the groundwork for a theory that expanded the relationship between humans and sciences, transcending pre-structural philosophies such as Romanticism, Realism, and Humanism.

Lévi-Strauss's theoretical underpinnings were frequently associated with the principles of the socialist thesis advocated by Karl Marx (1818-1883), as the Marxist movement was prevalent among French students and academic elites. This intellectual and socio-cultural milieu profoundly influenced the ideas that Lévi-Strauss pursued in formulating the initial concepts of his theory.

In Claude Lévi-Strauss's exploration of structuralism, there is a distinct emphasis on a comprehensive understanding designed to interconnect all structural elements, extracting them into a unified, meaningful representation. This fabric of comprehension facilitates interactions among elements, coalescing into a cohesive structure.

This principle, affirmed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) in relation to textual phenomena, was ambitiously extended by Lévi-Strauss to anthropology, positing it as a pivotal field that could exemplify structuralism as both an experimental and generalizable methodology.

Nonetheless, this proposition introduced significant confusion and ambiguity, particularly when contrasted with the perspectives of another structuralist, Jean Piaget (1896-1980), who contended that structuralism is fundamentally "not a philosophy but rather a method for scientific research." (Piaget, 1985, p. 116)

This delineation underscores a critical flaw in advocating structuralism purely as a systematic endeavor to regulate scientific research, without it serving as a universally applicable method across human societies. It highlights structuralism's inadequacy as a philosophy capable of addressing significant contemporary societal challenges.

From the theoretical divergence between structuralism and philosophy in Lévi-Strauss's assertions, it is evident that the structuralist theory emerged from the distillation of philosophical history, incorporating elements from social philosophies as a foundational basis to transition from literary and linguistic theoretical formulations to a broader philosophical doctrine.

Despite its ambitions, structuralism was not thoroughly primed to evolve into an epistemological theory, and thus continued to grapple with its historical relevance within the frameworks of contemporary philosophical methodologies.

In his endeavor to bridge these gaps between the theoretical frameworks of structuralism and philosophy, Lévi-Strauss re-envisioned the map of structuralism. He initiated this by countering humanism—the ideology that exalts the individual above all—and repositioning structuralism as a methodology that seeks a harmonious alignment between its scientific foundations and a humanistic vision for society.

This recalibration involved a profound re-understanding and redefinition of the humanities themselves. Lévi-Strauss's significant contribution was in isolating an autonomous symbolic system, independent from reality, existing apart from the objects it symbolizes and the individuals interpreting these symbols.

Cultural meanings, embedded within these symbolic systems, assert their independence from the external world and, to a certain extent, from human agents as well. Thus, he posited, the world has an objective existence solely within the symbolic systems that represent it (Clarke, 2015, pp. 9-10). This concept, advanced by Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, is seen as a transcendence of the humanistic and naturalistic tendencies that previously claimed knowledge could be achieved independently of symbolic systems.

This idea was notably prevalent among structuralists who resisted the ideologization of methodologies and the inclination towards a humanistic ideology that would predetermine the fate of knowledge and humanity by severing ties with the symbolic world entirely.

This notion also introduces a degree of ambiguity in its presentation, positioning itself as a revisionist response to the approaches anticipated by humanistic and naturalistic tendencies. It calls for a comprehensive and generalizing approach, emerging as a reaction to the foundational discussions during the establishment of structuralism and the dominance of various humanistic doctrines.

However, this concept did not witness philosophical or practical development, as it remained entrenched in theoretical rivalry without addressing the practical outcomes that a philosophical theory ought to explore to find suitable solutions.

Structuralism, once again, seeks an outlet through its analysis of the history of language, mythology, and anthropology at large, endeavoring to justify historical outcomes by broadly applying its methodological principles. Although the initial focus was predominantly on language, this approach invites critique for its broad application from language as a scientific inquiry to history as an open field for anthropological study.

Lévi-Strauss articulates, "These observations lead to a new hypothesis that places us at the core of the issue. We posit that the true composite units of myth are not isolated relations but clusters of relations, and these composite units only acquire a significant function through the configurations of these clusters." (Lévi-Strauss, 1977, p. 250)

In this statement, two prominent concerns arise: the ambiguity of the proposition and the extensive generalization of the assumption. Both approaches are methods that, ultimately, do not align with the humane study of society.

Thus, Lévi-Strauss's structuralism merges with streams of social and holistic thought to derive its foundational roots, presenting itself not as an isolated scientific occurrence but as an effort to appear both as a scientific methodology and an anthropological resolution. It is characterized by unclear foresight, insufficient understanding of

contemporary societal conditions, and a modest grasp of the societal dynamics at play.

Another dimension in which Lévi-Strauss's structuralism defends its validity is through its critique of existentialism and phenomenology, arguing that these philosophies overly sanctify the self and reality at the expense of understanding an objective structural composition.

2. Claude Lévi-Strauss's Reading from Within Structuralism

Claude Lévi-Strauss's aspirations to transition structuralism toward social research formed a central focus of his work. His starting point was an attempt to identify the pillars, characteristics, and individual features that could either transition to universality or converge in various societal elements, potentially evolving into social structures that facilitate transformation into a systemic, reciprocal operation within social events.

Lévi-Strauss engaged in both a critical and argumentative manner in his assessment of the history of tribes, their mass spread, disappearance, and reformation. He aimed to derive a clear equation to regulate the relationships between individuals as elements and societies as structures. "

In all these cases, historical observation gradually allows for a kind of distillation that permits the passage of what might be termed the content of general systems and lexical customs, retaining only the structural elements." (Lévi-Strauss, 1977, p. 42)

Here, Lévi-Strauss defines his ability to arbitrate historical events through the study of their communalities, adding, "In the case of the binary system, there appear to be three elements: the necessity of order; the concept of exchange, considered as a form that allows for the immediate integration of the self and the other; and the structural character of the gift. (Lévi-Strauss, 1977, p. 42)

These factors are found in all studied societies." Lévi-Strauss thus believes that the binary and reciprocal system is a functional general system, performing its role even if unrecognized by these societies and primitive peoples, presenting a stable and general condition that can be applied to historical studies and interrogated for results.

Likely, Lévi-Strauss considered the issues of barter, reciprocity, and duality through the linguistic lens of structuralism, transitioning from primary structures of kinship to the so-called "savage mind," in a modeling of the same rules that link language to perception, as projections moving towards realizing social understanding,

"Thus, there is a relationship between the meaning of transformation: either men into water foxes or water foxes into men (in one metaphorical case: a part of men, in the other metaphor: water foxes mating with women as men) (**Marc-Lipiansky, 1973, p. 62**)," despite the linguistic event being figurative and the social situation being real, Lévi-Strauss masks this overlap with justifications about the relationship between history and myth.

Notably, this section limits the intellectual field of Claude Lévi-Strauss. He defined a set of concepts and intellectual contexts through which he aimed to justify the outputs of structuralism, based on his preferences.

However, these elements from which he transitioned are not scientific givens but choices he made based on his research and the influence of his predecessors. Thus, he delineates a specific historical course for the structure but does not present what it should be in its subsequent developments. His study focuses on deconstructing previous and current structures without identifying potential relationships.

Although Lévi-Strauss did not manage to surpass the structuralism of previous founders, he proceeded with the hope of intensifying the structural method and matching it to scientific, historical, social, and anthropological realities.

Even this endeavor did not last long, as he retreated from scientific rigor in favor of an objective study of humans, due to structuralism's failure to keep pace with scientific progress, initially focusing exclusively on methodical science, "It is exceptional for structural anthropologists to be told that their interpretation of this phenomenon or this group of phenomena does not best account for the facts," representing a new direction from his earlier works focused on scientific and methodological rigor. (**Jackson, 2008, p. 129**)

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This shift becomes more apparent in the second part of his book "Structural Anthropology," regarding his statement, "Therefore, we must realize that the hypotheses of the human sciences cannot be refuted, not now or ever (**Jackson, 2008, p. 129**)," highlighting two essential variables: the focus on interpretation and the hypotheses of the human sciences, which were not possible to define within the scientific framework of structuralism.

This is a clear return from Claude Lévi-Strauss to looking outside the framework of classical structuralism, if we may say so, towards new terms and values that govern the human situation in general (from the concept of myth to the current social situation).

Despite some retreats where Claude Lévi-Strauss seemed open to philosophical inquiries and criticisms against structuralists, he remained loyal to the structuralist approach, because abandoning the goal of science in the structuralist method was not sufficient for him to forsake structuralism or declare a revolution within it.

He was content merely to accept the state of scientific discussion within the framework of the human sciences, which are not amenable to generalization and segmentation, due to the rise of philosophical criticism in Europe and America generally, and in France particularly. Here, the influence of social transformations on Lévi-Strauss's structural research also becomes apparent, making him subject to ethical questioning as well, as often abandoning scientific principles in favor of the situational social context.

The scientific vision with which Claude Lévi-Strauss views the principles of organizing human and social sciences, and his intention to transition them to the study of real society, remained captive behind barriers of failing to understand the human self as it should be, which also constitutes a lack of a coherent concept of consciousness.

Ferdinand de Saussure often revolved around the idea that these concepts need a comprehensive incubator to gather the elements and concepts to form a standing and shared structural meaning. This raises again the question about the capability of the structural method, scientifically, to encompass the movement of human society in light of these justificatory concepts.

3. Anthropological Critique and Social Humanization

Claude Lévi-Strauss, through his anthropological critique of ancient societies and his analysis of the structure of myth, sought a path towards humanizing his ideas, or transforming them into a humanistic philosophy capable of competing with the prevailing philosophies in his intellectual and social environment. He firmly adhered to rationalism as a clear system in response to existential and phenomenological philosophies that were prominent in Europe, particularly in France.

Lévi-Strauss's anthropological critical practices regarding social relations, myth, and human history ultimately aimed to unify a vision that establishes a dual relationship between nature and culture. He notably excluded uneducated societies, and this persistence in interpreting the history of vital societies is linked to his rationale for relying on reason itself within these societies to understand and study them.

This led him always to seek a coherent and highly performant language to validate experiences and ensure robust communication. "On the other hand, anthropology 'needs a common language to translate heterogeneous social experiences,' and the current vocabulary produced by our social classes is not suitable for this purpose. (Marc-Lipiansky, 1973, p. 45) This language must be 'highly abstract' to ensure precise control of concepts and knowledge in each society."

However, Lévi-Strauss also consistently sought to highlight his rejection of idealism. Thus, he moved beyond the idea of coherence between cultural and natural systems, encountering a new intellectual problem—the lack of alignment with the absolute idealism represented by culture and reason.

Simultaneously, he struggled to abandon rational philosophy to renew the humanistic concept of structuralism based on studying societies naturally. This conceptual evasion at the level of Claude Lévi-Strauss later became a methodological treatment that was insufficient in terms of the justifications he provided in distinguishing between the two systems he relied upon.

Lévi-Strauss avoids this pitfall by renewing his reduction of the cultural system within everything natural, to some extent avoiding

Kantian idealism, which separated the cultural mind from natural deformations (Clarke, 2015, p. 194). However, he could not entirely abandon the duality between nature and culture through the anthropological interpretation of societies and the critique he offered regarding the evolution of humans from primitive structures to social structures.

"The 'Elementary Structures' indeed contain the essence of Claude Lévi-Strauss's philosophy about the transition from nature to culture. 'Elementary Structures' revealed primitive societies that had developed highly complex social structures, responsive, according to Lévi-Strauss, to a need for reciprocity, which was at the same time a natural necessity and a societal possibility."

Here, we notice that Lévi-Strauss burdens the anxiety of duality on the threshold of a comprehensive humanistic view, not as independent systems of cognitive and non-cognitive nature, but he shifts the principle of duality by adhering to the natural rationality of humans and their natural development, which is again criticized by Roger Garaudy as considering that the self cannot be something separate or an entity that cannot express a possible expression.

"The basic premise that justifies this generalization is that language is the common trunk of all forms of culture, that inventing a language is tantamount to drawing a line between nature and culture, and that language is the very entity of culture, and that humans, in contrast to animals, are defined by the symbolic function." (Garaudy, 1979, p. 30)

This transition from nature to culture is defined within the communicative language paths that characterize the initial structure of society. Thus, Claude Lévi-Strauss moves towards integrating culture into the natural process by avoiding the dialectic of the duality between cultural and natural systems.

However, it is not possible to prove this according to Roger Garaudy, as Claude Lévi-Strauss only resorted to justifying the role of language, considering primary kinship systems as a language. Here, no progress is seen in terms of presenting the fundamental idea of the necessity to combine natural and cultural systems.

What enables Claude Lévi-Strauss to escape from precisely defining the relationship between culture and nature is his use of generalizing and comprehensive terms, which confirms his attempt to reduce the concept of culture within nature.

He "uses concepts like 'transition,' 'system,' and 'cycle,' which allow for formal treatment and enable the analysis of generalized types of social structures where levels of interaction and dependency can be integrated (**Marc-Lipiansky, 1973, p. 46**), " thus although Lévi-Strauss remains committed to literary rigor, he always tries to escape from the dialectic of duality.

Looking at the set of concepts that Claude Lévi-Strauss employs, it is often observed that he relies on the idea of generalization, a common tool used by anthropologists to achieve clear results. However, Lévi-Strauss resorts to the principle of generalization when there is a deficiency in the meanings of specific entities such as the self, consciousness, humanity, and the individual.

In the transition from the concept of nature, which encapsulated all meanings related to the non-material, to the concept of humanity, Claude Lévi-Strauss undertook a series of methodological and conceptual measures. This involved merging everything psychological and social to forge a transitional, interactive relationship between humans and nature.

"It is impossible to reduce social issues to mere individual psychology, for an individual does not exist outside of society because the defining characteristic of humanity is its symbolic capacity, and the symbolic system is always a social system. Only through societal membership can individual behavior be symbolic, and thus human.

As a result, both psychological and physiological tendencies must be rejected, as the social and psychological are inherently linked." Here, Lévi-Strauss utilizes a set of concepts revolving around the relationship between nature and humanity, referencing them with diversity and gradation.

He generally relies on the same formulation that combines nature and culture in merging the psychological and social, thus once

again avoiding the generalization he depended on in emphasizing the role of the unconscious in basic and general perceptions.

Lévi-Strauss's conceptual framework regarding humanity, nature, society, and others began to take an exaggerated path, where the selection of concepts often became more focused than the precision of the idea and the meaning it aimed to produce.

This is not unusual in contemporary philosophy, which tends towards a focus on concepts and a departure from fundamental theoretical structures, meaning that the branching into a group of concepts within a single framework to present a philosophical perspective sometimes loses the theory's substance, especially since the predominant approach is to cram in concepts rather than to clearly establish the theory, even if it doesn't include all these modern terms and concepts.

4. Diverse Perspectives on Language and Society

Structuralist inclinations fundamentally operate by reconceptualizing every entity as a conglomeration of interconnected components, inherently organized into a comprehensive structure. This paradigm was widely embraced among structuralists, serving as a foundational principle for elucidating all phenomena, even those of a natural order.

A representative analogy posits, "Almost everything in this world, whether material or immaterial, possesses a structure. This includes a glass of water, which, although seemingly unstructured at first glance, reveals a complex molecular structure upon closer analysis." (**Jackson, 2008, p. 63**)

This assertion marks a shift from a naturalistic explanation of entities to a linguistic and subsequently social interpretation, thus framing understanding within a structured model. In the realm of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, this approach renders societies, histories, mythologies, literary compositions, languages, and political systems as inherently accumulative or synthetic constructs, which interact under specified conditions.

Nevertheless, this perspective encounters critical challenges regarding the essence of its application: How are these structures

assembled? By what criteria are their components identified and unified? What specific roles do these components play within the overall structure? Can the implications or results of these interconnections be definitively demonstrated?

Lévi-Strauss frequently attributed the emergent meanings within a structure to the role of language, positing that language inherently organizes and justifies structural components, not as a means to validate the functions of these elements prior to their integration within the structure, but rather as a descriptive tool.

He suggests, "Societies, myths, literary works, and similar entities exhibit a structure of language, or at times, are composed of individual expressions derived from a foundational language that underpins these expressions. " (**Jackson, 2008, p. 63**)

Thus, this becomes the standard paradigm for structuralist interpretation, which, while potent, cannot be indiscriminately generalized but rather should be tailored to specific events, procedures, and experiential contexts. The inherent scientific, philosophical, and methodological rigor of structuralism resists the broad generalization of phenomena not subjected to identical experiences and conditions.

In structuralism, language is positioned as a universal model applicable across various fields, embodying the primary medium of communication between individuals and societies. Language only conveys meaning when it meets the condition of verbal aggregation; it is a composite assembly of comprehensible words orchestrated to fulfill a specific purpose, namely, the transmission of meaning.

In this construct, language evolves as a communicative tool among individuals, thereby becoming a defining characteristic of society, potentially to the extent that a society may even be named after its predominant language. It also establishes the foundational relationships between history and myth, logic and meaning. Claude Lévi-Strauss further introduces the marital relationship as a pivotal example of how linguistic structures perform within a unified system termed kinship.

When scrutinizing the meaning that Claude Lévi-Strauss, the structuralist, seeks to convey, the analogy to language does not uniformly translate into analogous approaches or outcomes. While it functions illustratively in depicting the synthesis of parts, diverse cultural conditions may surpass this model, elevating art to a more profound communicative medium.

Nevertheless, structuralists often return to similar modeling paradigms, asserting that the very compositions themselves instantiate the structure of the artistic work. Consequently, the structuralism expounded by Claude Lévi-Strauss frequently appears unsubstantiated, even by his own articulations, given its boundless interpretations and its dependency on the model of language, which varies extensively in its quantity, quality, content, and meaning compared to other phenomena or examples.

For example, delving into the concept of the self propels us beyond the restrictive confines of structuralist perspectives. According to various philosophers of the mind, the self possesses no antecedent structure but is invariant, self-explanatory in its existence, and represents an embodiment of the divine self without any historical or linguistic antecedents.

With this perspective, Claude Lévi-Strauss endeavored to extend structural research related to language into a broader societal context, interpreting all human-centric phenomena: "From the elementary structures of kinship to the wild thought, from sad orbits to the cooked and the raw, from the origins of table manners to from honey to ash, Lévi-Strauss elegantly achieved the transformation of the linguistic model, transitioning in this manner from a theory in language to a theory in kinship, to a theory in reason, to a theory in mythology, and finally to a general theory in societies." (**Garaudy, 1979, p. 23**)

However, this rationale inevitably encounters contradictions with the relationships between the structure and its evolution, or between the structure and the process, given their divergent understandings that challenge the dependence on structures in their historical, contextual, and derivative manifestations.

Conclusion – Study Results

Claude Lévi-Strauss's attempts to generalize the synthetic phenomenon of language across the formation of society, mythology, history, politics, economics, and all fields appears implausible under this analysis, except in facets closely aligned with the linguistic situation. Even when forms resembling the language model are identified, their methodologies, outcomes, and content vary significantly, and generalization cannot steadfastly serve as a rule for transcending the previous theories of structuralism.

Claude Lévi-Strauss's thesis is permeated with ambiguities and a lack of clarity, conflicting with the essence of philosophical, literary, and intellectual theories, which traditionally rely on a foundation of clarity to offer persuasive explanations and address the persistent issues and questions that ignite human inquiry.

His adoption of Marxist references was not particularly effective, appearing as a learned inclination inspired by the prevailing intellectual climate, which failed to address the emerging challenges within the frameworks of human and social sciences.

Through Claude Lévi-Strauss's critique of classical structuralism and his attempts to formulate a structural model based on the principle of generalization, it is clear that the entire structuralist approach falters when it fails to elucidate the significance of the connections between parts, and to resolve the issues inherent in human and social sciences, as well as the interrelation of mythology with history.

Although Lévi-Strauss aimed to develop a structural model, the outcomes he achieved seem unconvincing, leading to ambiguous, indeterminate results that, in one way or another, dilute the essence of his theoretical proposition.

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