

Book reviews

Modern World Issues from the Perspective of Anthropology

[(For Process Antropologia și problemele lumii moderne (Anthropology Faced with the Problems of the Modern World), by Lévi-Strauss, Claude, Preface by Maurice Ollender, Translation by Giuliano Sfichi, Iași, Polirom Publishing House,]

Marțian Iovan

Professor PhD

“Vasile Goldiș” Western University, Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Arad, Romania
e-mail: miovan@uvvg.ro

Hailed as the father of modern social anthropology and as a major exponent of structuralism in the twentieth century, being part of the same family of thinkers as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Edmund Leach etc., Claude Lévi-Strauss asserted himself, during 1950-1970, as the leader of this family of intellectuals, as the patriarch of French structuralism, whose name is featured in a veritable *pantheon* of social sciences (Eribon 1990: 91–98). In fact, structuralism is a current of thought that emerged in the early twentieth century, in language sciences, with the publication, by the Swiss scholar Ferdinand de Saussure, of his *Course of General Linguistics* (1909), in which language is envisaged as a general system of signs, based on interdependence, in which any change may cause changes to the whole. The structural and systemic approach spread, then, to numerous social and human sciences, including anthropology. Claude Lévi-Strauss is a continuator of linguistic structuralism, capitalizing on an inclination he had since childhood, as he confessed in an interview with Adelbert Reif: “From childhood I was bothered by the so-called irrational and I have always tried to find an Order beyond what we are told is Disorder.” In all his research and analyses, he looked systematically for Order.

His work, entitled *L'anthropologie face aux problèmes du monde moderne* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil), translated into Romanian and published, over

the same year, by Polirom, Iasi, pertains to this cultural and scientific context, updating and synthesizing the great themes of his previous works, including: *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949); *A World on the Wane* (1955), *Structural Anthropology* (2 vols., 1958, 1973); *The Savage Mind* (1962), *Mythologiques* (4 vols., 1964, 1966, 1968, 1971).

This work of Lévi-Strauss is actually the result of three conferences held in Tokyo in 1986, following the invitation of the Ishizaka Foundation, which were converted into three chapters of the volume, entitled: *I. The end of the cultural supremacy of the West; II. Three major contemporary issues: sexuality, economic development and mythical thinking; III. The recognition of cultural diversity.*

In this work Lévi-Strauss aims to explore “how anthropology regards the fundamental issues faced by humanity today” (p. 11), how these issues are formulated by anthropology from its distinctive perspective and what it is that sets apart its way of seeing contemporary world problems, in the hope of making them clearer. In his investigations, Lévi-Strauss makes a synthesis of all the main topics related to society, which had preoccupied him throughout his lifetime, from the standpoint of a new form of humanism, for anthropological structuralism is a “new democratic humanism” whose geographic area comprises all of the inhabited earth, and its method reunites procedures pertaining to all forms of knowledge: humanities and natural sciences.

Thus, anthropological humanism goes beyond traditional humanism in every way. All previous versions of humanism had been created for the privileged, as all came from privileged civilizations. Yet, anthropology proclaims, with multidisciplinary arguments, a humanism that is twice universal: first, it is the postulate of a new humanism that “nothing that is human can be alien to humans” (p. 62), and second, it uses methods and techniques borrowed from all sciences, and puts them to the service of human knowledge, thus calling for humanity’s reconciliation with nature, within the framework of generalized humanism. Regardless of how it is proclaimed, anthropology always aspires to the knowledge of the *total human*, based on her *productions* and *representations*.

From the position of this new anthropological humanism, Lévi-Strauss asks a series of questions: What does the “end of Western cultural supremacy” consist of, in a global society where everything seems to indicate that it tends toward a world civilization? How will cultures evolve in relation to races (to the genetic stocks of some populations), ideologies and religions? What dimensions will the development and progress of modern societies have from the standpoint of anthropological humanism? Can we apply judgments of value to past or contemporary cultures and to their directions of development? What should the new generations of governments, who are in a position to choose between different experiences, patterns, economic, social, cultural, ideological, or religious paradigms, do in order to ensure system-level balance or an optimal condition in the relationship between unity and diversity, between structure and the concrete phenomena through which it is manifested? What could the modern world learn from the experiences and lives of ancient societies (those that do not have writing and mechanical technologies), knowing that they have a history of hundreds of thousands of years (perhaps even two million years), while modern societies emerged three to four centuries ago? How can anthropology contribute to solving the great issues of contemporary society, such as economic, demographic, and ecological imbalances, artificial procreation, the “explosion of ideologies and integritisms”, the coexistence and clash of religions, the links between scientific thinking and mythical thinking? etc.

Through its specific methods anthropology can make original contributions to the answers to these questions, first and foremost by providing a better

understanding of these issues. This is because anthropology is a subject that is dedicated to studying the “human phenomenon”, particular facts, the lifestyles of savage peoples and human societies, through specific methods, processes and techniques, in order to discover their common denominator, the constants of the human condition. Observation, comparison, ethnographic survey, studying traditional, archaic societies in different ways “provides the only means to understand how people lived together for a historical period that might be equivalent to 99% of the entire duration of human life and, geographically speaking, until recently, on three quarters of the Earth’s inhabited surface” (p. 30). The anthropologist discovers the roots from the depths of the “unconscious” side of individuals and groups, the customs, traditions, attitudes and moods of archaic societies, the matrix that holds groups together and is expressed by strings of individual behavioral manifestations that seem to have no links between one another.

Anthropology assumes ambitions which give it its originality in treating the key issues of postmodernity. First, anthropological research seeks to reach objectivity (p. 41). Such objectivity rises above the specific values of society and the researcher’s social background, but, especially, rises above her method of thinking, in order to reach valid formulations from the point of view of any possible honest and objective observer. The second ambition of anthropology is to reflect the entirety, in the sense that social life can be conceived as a system whose elements are all organically related. In order to know a social phenomenon, one must look beyond it and identify the structure that generated it, the common form of social experiences, the invariant properties that lie at the foundation of the various types of social life. Thirdly, the anthropologist aims to find complete objectivity, at that level at which phenomena keep some meaning for individual consciousness (p. 47), a meaning in the experience lived by the subject.

Analyzing the specific problems of modernity, Lévi-Strauss argues that anthropologists will be able to bring an original contribution, starting from the fundamental distinction between two ways of social life: a traditional and archaic way of life, which is characteristic of authentic societies, and recently emerged forms (over the last centuries), which incorporate written communication, mechanization, various modern industries, but from which the first type is not missing. From this perspective, the West-

ern model of culture and civilization, forged at the beginnings of modernity and regarded as a prototype of perfection, justice and universal happiness of the people, has become “obsolete” in the twentieth century. While Western society has gained enormous power in relation to the environment and to nature, owing to the development of natural sciences and especially to increases in productivity, the very same society gave rise to perverse, harmful problems and realities, such as pollution, depletion of resources, the enormous concentration of population in urban agglomerations, which imposes an artificial and dehumanizing existence, the creation of an overwhelming bureaucracy, the genocide of wars, gulags, the explosion of “integrisms”, etc., threatening the survival of the human population. If Western society has lost its model, is anthropology able to provide compensating solutions? Lévi-Strauss is optimistic, believing that anthropologists have the mission to demonstrate that the values in which Europeans believe are not the only possible ones, “that other lifestyles, other value systems have enabled and continue to enable human communities to find happiness. Anthropology urges us to put some of our vanity aside, respect other ways of living, reexamining ourselves through the knowledge of other traditions that excite our surprise ...” (p. 64). In other words, a society or government should not believe that its institutions, habits and beliefs are the only possible ones, or that they are the best. The lesson taught by anthropology is that one can learn from others, without damage to one’s dignity and feelings of personal pride.

A good example of how anthropology can provide a foothold for solving the problems of contemporary society is the issue of finding remedies to sterility, which has become acute and obsessive in Europe, the U.S. and Australia, in the last 50 years. The development of genetics and medical science has made it possible to discover ways to assist procreation or obtain it artificially. Thus, hundreds of thousands of couples in which one or both partners are infertile can have children, using various methods such as artificial insemination, womb rental, egg donation, *in vitro* fertilization, embryo freezing etc.. With this, the problems that occur are no longer technical, but social, legal, moral, and psychological. Who will have parenting rights over children resulting from such manipulations, both *de facto* and *de jure*? Situations created by medical and genetic manipulations can be highly complex, and entail unprecedented challenges for Western civilization. For

example, a child may have a mother and two fathers, another child could have two mothers and a father, another has two mothers and two fathers, and yet another may have two fathers (when the biological father and the legal father are not one and the same man) and three mothers (egg-donating mother, carrying mother and legal mother).

Outlooks on parentage, in the case of assisted procreation, are very different, and the legislations of European countries are in disagreement on the rights and duties of social and, respectively, biological parents. Lévi-Strauss, the patriarch of social anthropology, shows that anthropology can provide support for answers to such legal, social and moral issues. For example, insemination with a donor has its equivalent in Africa, in the *Samo* people of Burkina Faso; post-mortem insemination in the *Nuer* people of Sudan; couples of two women practice assisted procreation in order to have children, in the *Yoruba* people of Nigeria etc. Such parentage relationships, present in some archaic societies, anticipate modern techniques and legal regulations. In these societies, there is no conflict between biological procreation and social parenthood. They give priority to the social side, with no clashes occurring between biological and social parenthood in the mindset of the group or individuals.

Therefore, human experiences present in archaic societies are extremely wide and varied. From their analysis, one can single out those that may be considered as constant “universals” of human nature. On this basis, anthropologists may suggest the frameworks in which some yet uncertain developments will take place.

Another problem that preoccupied Lévi-Strauss over several decades concerns relationships, affinities between mythical and scientific thinking, knowing that archaic societies are guided by myths, beliefs, and religious concepts, in different combinations, and associated with rites, resulting in a certain coherence of community life. On the other hand, modern societies no longer abound in myths. “To solve the issues raised by the human condition and natural phenomena” Claude Lévi-Strauss argues “they turn to sciences or, more precisely, for each type of problem, they turn to a specialized scientific discipline” (p. 133). But it is not always so, for both myths and science have answered a perennial human need – that of knowing the world, society and the meaning of one’s life in this world. The place and functions of myths were taken, later, by history, in its broadest sense, so that everything that myths had

done for societies without writing, history will do for modern societies: legitimize the existing social order, explain why society is as it is, justify the state of current societies through historical measures, foreshadow the future in the light of its knowledge and evaluation of the past, along with the present. But how much of it is mythical knowledge and how much of it is an objective reflection in the mind and texts of historians? The anthropological perspective invites us to think carefully and critically, as there can be no absolute interpretation of the historical past, but several relative ones. Therefore, scientific knowledge, as was designed from the beginning of modernity, generating objective and absolute truths, is a very particular and limited case. Rather, it is not the contradiction between mythical thought and scientific thought that is valid, but the emergence of the former with respect to the latter. We cannot rule out, today, Lévi-Strauss concludes, the possibility that, in the future, scientific thinking and mythical thinking would become ever closer, the development of one depending on the evolution of the other.

In conclusion, this mature work of Lévi-Strauss is a synthesis of all his works and creations, putting in a clear light the paradigm of structuralism as a theory and a method, a democratic humanism that is also a research practice, as an attraction to theoretical, explanatory models and the ambition to conquer objectivity in knowledge, as a code of social existence and heuristic approach to knowing the truth (Paul Droit 2009). As an anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss was associated with a social orientation in the field, succeeding in using structuralism both as a theory and as a method, as a model for giving personal meaning to social life and the world. The harmonious blending of conceptual and sensitivity-based knowledge, in the case of structuralism, the insight into the infinite variety of phenomena, in order to identify, in the abstract plane, the deep structure, the order that is hidden from our view, in a

kind of “subconsciousness” of the life of social groups, to find the system that interconnects the various components that we perceive as chaotic. From this point of view, the work of Lévi-Strauss, as Maurice Ollender said, “is now a laboratory of thought, open to the future” (Ollender 2011: 7), in which answers can be shaped to the crucial issues of society at the beginning of the third millennium.

The structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, synthetically expressed in this book, can be deemed an innovative work, which should be a reference frame for any new anthropological project. This is not because Lévi-Strauss was the only one who studied the structure and order behind individual phenomena in society, but because of the originality of the consequences he reached (Pauillon 1973). If so, “this is because, unlike the ‘theories’ of yesteryear, structuralism sought to reconcile, in the words of Lévi-Strauss, ‘the sensitive and the intelligible, art and logic’” (Izard, Lenclud 1999: 646). This is why the readership of Lévi-Strauss’ work is still substantial, owing especially to the renewing perspective he used in his research.

References

- Lévi-Strauss, Claude, and Didier Eribon (1990) *De près et de loin*. Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob.
- Droit, Roger – Paul (2009) Claude Lévi-Strauss, anthropologue, père du structuralisme. *Le Monde* 4 November.
- Ollender, Maurice (2011) Avant-propos. In: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *L’anthropologie face aux problèmes du monde moderne*; pp. 5-8. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Izard, Michel and Gérard Lenclud (1999) Structuralisme. In: P. Bonté and M. Izard (eds.), *Dictionnaire de l’ethnologie et de l’anthropologie*; pp. 644–647. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.