

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Formative Years*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, x + 208p.

Whenever I introduce structuralism to my undergraduate students, I tell them the story of listening to the structuralist anthropologist Mary Douglas speak at a conference. Demonstrating some point that I have long since forgotten, Douglas explained that if you cut an apple horizontally you find a star. On hearing this, my first thought was, "But who cuts an apple horizontally?" My second thought was, "A structuralist does." The point of this classroom anecdote is to illustrate to students how structuralists see the world through a lens of wonderment. Structuralists assume culture and society are inherently intricate, subtle and patterned, like stars hidden in apples or the frost on your windowpane. In other words, they possess some of the most beautiful minds around. I go on to suggest to my students that if you dismiss structuralism out of hand as over-generalizing, empirically improbable, and unverifiable, then you have missed the genius and the gift that structuralists bring to the academic scene. In terms of my discipline, sociology, I've generally preferred the intellectual company of apple cutters to that of bean counters.

In his concise and engaging intellectual biography, Christopher Johnson helps us get inside the beautiful and bewildering mind of structuralism's patriarch - Claude Lévi-Strauss. Johnson's goal is not to provide an overview of structuralist theory, as "...this life work - possesses an aesthetic unity that transcends the narrowly scientific programme of structuralism"(8). Johnson limits his discussion to Lévi-Strauss's "formative years" between the mid-1940s and the early 1960s, and situates Lévi -Strauss's accession to the "status of the elder" (1) in the French academy within the context of intellectual conditions of the time. In order to understand Lévi-Strauss's approach to the study of society and culture, one must, according to Johnson, recognize that Lévi-Strauss's work was critical to establishing anthropology as an academic discipline in France, distinct from Durkheimian sociology.

Johnson organizes his discussion around the pivotal intellectual points in Lévi-Strauss's career as they unfolded in France, and backs up his claims with artful explications of the author's texts. He begins with Lévi-Strauss's return to France after his exile to the United States during World War II, where he was exposed to American anthropology and, most notably, European structural linguist Roman Jakobson. He ends with Lévi-Strauss's promotion to the prestigious Collège de France in 1960, when

anthropology in France became properly recognized and - for better or worse - essentially equivalent to Lévi-Strauss's structuralism. Some surprising and intriguing points in this story include the apparent influence of information theory and cybernetics on Lévi-Strauss's thought and Lévi-Strauss's attempt to challenge existentialism as the premier intellectual force in mid-century France. As Johnson explains, Lévi-Strauss does not see anthropology as serving narrowly practical uses in French society, but as providing a whole new way of understanding human morality.

For this reader, two central discussions in Johnson's book are the most compelling. In chapter 2, Johnson argues that Durkheim's late work on the elementary structuring of societies (in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*) directly influenced Marcel Mauss' study of gift giving, which subsequently generated Lévi-Strauss's interest in the notion of reciprocity as a cultural universal. In the following chapter, Johnson discusses the importance of Lévi-Strauss's shift from the study of kinship to the study of religion in terms of developing his most fundamental theoretical assumption that symbolic representation is the basis of society. My only small grievance with this discussion is Johnson's emphasis on Mauss and underemphasis on Durkheim. After all, Durkheim's late work is clearly concerned with the unconscious symbolic structuring of society, the centrality of religion in this process, and the universal nature of this structuring (allowing Durkheim to argue, in a mode that foreshadows Lévi-Strauss, that totemism provides the basic classification system necessary to scientific thinking).

In the final chapters, Johnson brings his own literary sensibility to the fore by discussing Lévi-Strauss's semi-autobiographical text (*Tristes tropiques*) and its contribution to Lévi-Strauss's own celebrity. He explores the tension between structuralism understood as a science autonomous from its founder and Lévi-Strauss's own alignment of structuralism with himself. Ultimately, as Johnson convincingly argues, Lévi-Strauss is in many ways a burden to anthropology as social science, especially in France where anthropology has been unable to develop an identity beyond that provided by Lévi-Strauss. Indeed, the contribution made by Lévi-Strauss's creative and synthetic mind is as easily located in philosophy, the field in which he was first trained, as in social science. In this way, Lévi-Strauss's legacy is a broadly intellectual one, and although he brought anthropology institutionally into its own in France, he generated a system that could not be confined to a single discipline.

In short, Johnson provides a skillfully crafted and scholarly text. He traces key conceptual themes as he sees them unfolding in Lévi-Strauss's thought, and organizes his discussion around Lévi-Strauss's own words and ideas. As anyone who has read Lévi-Strauss knows, explicating his thought in a concise and coherent way is no mean feat. Johnson's book is a lasting contribution to the academic discussion of both structuralism and Lévi-Strauss.

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