

From Plato to Levi-Strauss

Embodying Epistemology



Second Passes: Re-Reading

- From "The Quest for Power"

It was perhaps then, for the first time, that I understood something which was later confirmed by equally demoralizing experiences in other parts of the world. Journeys, those magic caskets full of dreamlike promises, will never again yield up their treasures untarnished. A proliferating and overexcited civilization has broken the silence of the seas once and for all. The perfumes of the tropics and the pristine freshness of human beings have been corrupted by a busyness with dubious implications, which mortifies our desires and dooms us to acquire only contaminated memories.

...

So I can understand the mad passion for travel books and their deceptiveness. They create the illusion of something which no longer exists but still should exist, if we were to have any hope of avoiding the overwhelming conclusion that the history of the past twenty thousand years is irrevocable. ...There is nothing to be done about it now; ...Mankind has opted for monoculture; it is in the process of creating a mass civilization, as beetroot is grown in the mass. Henceforth, man's daily bill of fare will consist only of this one item.

Tristes Tropiques, pp. 37-38

Second Passes: Re-Reading

■ From "The Quest for Power"

In exploring all this, I was being true to myself as an archaeologist of space, seeking in vain to recreate a lost local color with the help of fragments and debris.

Then, insidiously, illusion began to lay its snares. I wished I had lived in the days of real journeys, when it was still possible to see the full splendor of a spectacle that had not yet been blighted, polluted and spoiled; I wished I had not trodden that ground as myself, but as Berier, Tavernier or Manucci did....When was the best time to see India?... For every five years I move back in time, I am able to save a custom, gain a ceremony or share in another belief. But I know the texts too well not to realize that, by going back a century, I am at the same time forgoing data and lines of inquiry which would offer intellectual enrichment. And so I am caught within a circle from which there is no escape: the less human societies were able to communicate with each other and therefore to corrupt each other through contact, the less their respective emissaries were able to perceive the wealth and significance of their diversity...I lose on both counts, and more seriously than may at first appear, for, while I complain of being able to glimpse no more than the shadow of the past, I may be insensitive to reality as it is taking shape at this very moment, since I have not reached the stage of development at which I would be capable of perceiving it. A few hundred years hence, in this same place, another traveler, as despairing as myself, will mourn the disappearance of what I might have seen, but failed to see. I am subject to a double infirmity: all that I perceive offends me, and I constantly reproach myself for not seeing as much as I should.

Tristes Tropiques, p. 43

Second Passes: Re-Reading

■ From "The Quest for Power"

For a long time I was paralyzed by this dilemma, but I have the feeling that the cloudy liquid is now beginning to settle. Evanescent forms are becoming clearer, and confusion is being slowly dispelled. What has happened is that time has passed. Forgetfulness, by rolling my memories along in its tide, has done more than merely wear them down or consign them to oblivion. The profound structure it has created out of the fragments allows me to achieve a more stable equilibrium, and to see a clearer pattern. One order has been replaced by another. Between these two cliffs, which preserve the distance between my gaze and its object, time, the destroyer, has begun to pile up rubble. Sharp edges have been blunted and whole sections have collapsed, periods and places collide, are juxtaposed or are inverted, like strata displaced by the tremors on the crust of an ageing planet. Some insignificant detail belonging to the distant past may now stand out like a peak, while whole layers of my past have disappeared without trace. Events without any apparent connection, and originating from incongruous periods and places, slide one over the other and suddenly crystallize into a sort of edifice which seems to have been conceived by an architect wiser than my personal history. 'Every man,' wrote Chateaubriand, 'carries within him a world which is composed of all that he has seen and loved, and to which he constantly returns, even when he is traveling through, and seems to be living in, some different world.' Henceforth, it will be possible to bridge the gap between the two worlds. Time, in an unexpected way, has extended its isthmus between life and myself; twenty years of forgetfulness were required before I could establish communion with my earlier experience, which I had sought the world over without understanding its significance or appreciating its essence.

Anthropology: The Science of Relations

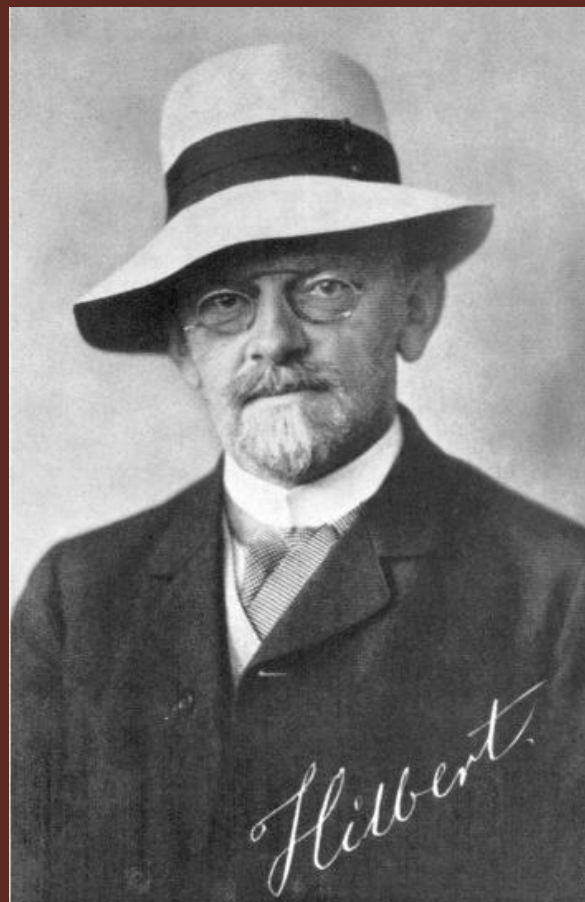
(recalling from Haun previously)

■ Some influences on Levi-Strauss

- Ferdinand de Saussure's *General Course in Linguistics*, work in phonology
- Sigmund Freud—especially the notion of the unconscious
- Other anthropologists and sociologists, particularly Marcel Mauss
- General influence of abstract mathematics at the turn of the 20th Century

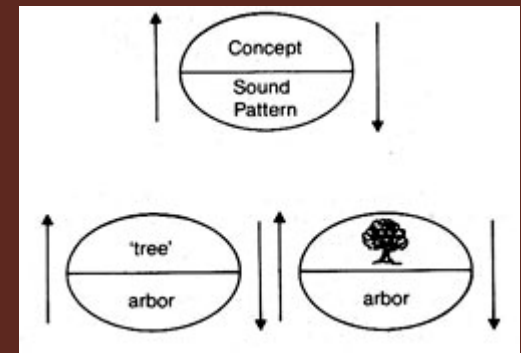
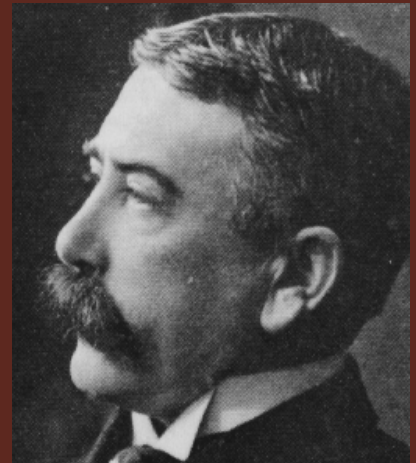
The Science of Relations

- David Hilbert and Formalist Languages
 - Example: Geometry
 - Points, lines, planes; or tables, chairs, and beer mugs
 - Get away from intuition and meaning derived from experience to consider instead *relations, sets, etc.*



Linguistics and Semiotics

- Ferdinand de Saussure
 - Language approached synchronically rather than historically (or diachronically)
 - Emphasizes language as a system of interrelated elements in which each element is defined by its relations to other elements
 - Signs are determined by difference, negation, opposition
 - Distinguishes *Langue* and *Parole*
 - *Sign = acoustic image + concept*
signs are thus double-sided, like a sheet of paper



Signs are conventions

- The association of signifier and signified is arbitrary
 - Like language, the social is an autonomous reality (the same one, moreover); symbols are more real than what they symbolize, the signifier precedes and determines the signified.
 - L-S sets forth structuralism's canonical thesis: that the code precedes and is independent from the message, and that the subject is subjected to the signifier's law: "The definition of a code is to be translatable into another code. This property defines it and is called structure."



Magritte

Marcel Mauss



■ Marcel Mauss—*The Gift*

- Rule of reciprocity with its triple obligation
 - Giving
 - Receiving
 - Returning

was a model for Levi-Strauss's economy of matrimonial exchange and forms the basis of networks of connections, equivalences, and alliances

- Incest taboo is a rule of reciprocity (rather than a biological fact about gene pools):
"The sole function of the incest taboo is not to forbid; it is set in place to ensure and found an exchange, directly or indirectly, immediately or not."
- Exchange creates a system of communication

Discontinuity between Nature and Culture

■ Marcel Mauss—*The Gift*

- “For me, structuralism is the theory of the symbolic in the *Work of Marcel Mauss*: the independence of language and of kinship rules shows that the symbolic, the signifier, are autonomous.”
- The incest taboo is a rule of reciprocity (rather than a biological fact about gene pools):
“The sole function of the incest taboo is not to forbid; it is set in place to ensure and found an exchange, directly or indirectly, immediately or not. It is not moral reprobation that makes incest illicit, nor a murmur of the heart, but the exchange value establishing a social relationship. ...The question of incest is socially absurd before it is morally culpable.”



Anthropology: General Theory of Relationships

- History organizes its data in relation to conscious expressions of social life, while anthropology proceeds by examining its unconscious foundations.
- But as soon as the various aspects of social life—economic, linguistic, etc.—are expressed as relationships, anthropology will become a general theory of relationships.

Anthropology: General Theory of Relationships

The customs of community, taken as a whole, always have a particular style and are reducible to systems. I am of the opinion that the number of such systems is not unlimited and that—in their games, dreams or wild imaginings—human societies, like individuals, never create absolutely, but merely choose certain combinations from an ideal repertoire that it should be possible to define. By making an inventory of all recorded customs of all those imagined in myths or suggested in children's games or adult games, or in the dreams of healthy or sick individuals or in psychopathological behavior, one could arrive at a sort of table, like that of the chemical elements, in which all actual or hypothetical customs would be grouped in families, so that one could see at a glance which customs a particular society had in fact adopted.

Tristes Tropiques, p. 178

Levi-Strauss a Platonist?

- So what is the power of structuralism?
- Consider once again the “Quest for Power”

For a long time I was paralyzed by this dilemma, but I have the feeling that the cloudy liquid is now beginning to settle. Evanescent forms are becoming clearer, and confusion is being slowly dispelled. What has happened is that time has passed. Forgetfulness, by rolling my memories along in its tide, has done more than merely wear them down or consign them to oblivion. The profound structure it has created out of the fragments allows me to achieve a more stable equilibrium, and to see a clearer pattern. ... Events without any apparent connection, and originating from incongruous periods and places, slide one over the other and suddenly crystallize into a sort of edifice which seems to have been conceived by an architect wiser than my personal history. ‘Every man,’ wrote Chateaubriand, ‘carries within him a world which is composed of all that he has seen and loved, and to which he constantly returns, even when he is traveling through, and seems to be living in in, some different world.’ Henceforth, it will be possible to bridge the gap between the two worlds. Time, in an unexpected way, has extended its isthmus between life and myself; twenty years of forgetfulness were required before I could establish communion with my earlier experience, which I had sought the world over without understanding its significance or appreciating its essence.

Recovering the Code

Levi-Strauss

- No access to pristine, originary, and now forgotten experience
- Fieldwork over many years recovers shards of pattern that crystallizes into an edifice conceived by a wiser architect
- The deep structures of social and cultural organization are the essence

Plato

- Knowledge of truth, justice, the good and all the forms lost at birth
- Learning is recollection
- The forms, never present in the phenomena, are the essential structures of knowledge