

Andy Blunden. May 2008

An essay to mark Claude Lévi-Strauss's 100th birthday

Anti-Historicism and the Algerian War

Introduction

The publication of Claude Lévi-Strauss's "The Savage Mind" in early 1962, as France stood on the precipice of civil war, launched a trend of "anti-historicism" in social philosophy. This "anti-historicism" had its roots in Durkheim's sociology and structural linguistics, and while remaining a positive contribution to scientific technique, the ethical and political implications of this turn were far reaching and mixed. The point of this article is to show how social movements impact on the development of science. In spite of Lévi-Strauss's self-conscious adoption of the cloak of scientific objectivity, his "anti-historicism" was a direct response to the Algerian struggle for independence and presaged the decentred post-colonial world then emerging from such struggles across the world. The impact of this "anti-historicism" on science and politics shifted over the following decades but such transformations were *also* responses to social movements, whether or not they were valid scientific paradigm shifts. I will explain what I mean by "anti-historicism" later, once some of the nuances of Lévi-Strauss's position and its relation to the Algerian independence war have been explored.

Lévi-Strauss's Intellectual Development up to 1962

At school in the 1920s, Lévi-Strauss was involved in moderate socialist politics and at university was general secretary of the Federation of Socialist Students for a time, but his experience of the Second World War and in Brazil led him to a political position of refusing to accept the superiority of his own Western European culture, inclusive of both the dominant capitalist culture and the socialist alternative. He did not 'drop out' though, but adopted as his central value Western society's key achievement, *science*, and worked assiduously to secure a place in that society as an esteemed scientist. His greatest fear was the prospect of the world being subsumed by a *monoculture*, and above all he valued *cultural diversity*, which he credited as both the content and the source of progress.

His commitment to cultural diversity and admiration for 'primitive' (Lévi-Strauss's word) cultures pre-existed all of his scientific discoveries as an anthropologist, and indeed motivated his interest in anthropology. But he almost never lent his name and prestige to a cause or spoke out publicly against the destruction of the 'primitive' cultures he so admired, *almost* never. Lévi-Strauss consistently adopted the cloak of scientific objectivity and judged that his political aims could best be furthered by distancing himself behind the walls of the academy. Lévi-Strauss's trope of discovering his political beliefs to be scientifically proven facts is really a very dogmatic mode of political argument.

By his own account, in his youth Lévi-Strauss had three 'intellectual mistresses': geology, Freud and Marx. But he was never a Marxist in any recognizable sense; Marx for him was an icon of ethical skepticism and scientific critique, but he never accepted Marx's commitment to socialism, class struggle nor his historical method. Likewise, geology and psychoanalysis stood for the need to probe below surface impressions to the

underlying structures. His public admiration for Marx and Freud did however serve to give him an undeserved reputation for being on the Left.

Although he was not interested in Rousseau at first, he later embraced him, and whereas Rousseau had used the 'state of nature' as a thought experiment, it was very easy to appropriate this, as many others have, for a belief in an idyllic condition of society pre-existing modern society.

Lévi-Strauss's training in social science was under the aura of Durkheim whose ideas dominated French social science at the time. By virtue of its formal, objectivist character, reliant on 'social facts', Durkheim's sociology is relativistic and non-historical by nature. Durkheim emphasised the non-historical character of his sociology for purposes of territoriality, marking out an academic space against the historians. And Durkheim's theory was also explicitly ideological inasmuch as it was developed for the purpose of finding a cure to the destruction of social solidarity wrought by capitalism, whilst rejecting the alternative of socialism. Durkheim's theory was predisposed to minimize conflict and elevated the sociologist into the subject position of a physician charged with curing the ills of society.

Likewise, de Saussure's structural linguistics was developed by contrast with positivistic theories which relied on etymology and phonics, but was never '*anti-historical*' as such. Lévi-Strauss was introduced to structural linguistics by Roman Jakobson during the war while working at the New School for Social Research in New York. The idea of treating social practices as signs and appropriating the methods of structural linguistics to analyse cultures as linguistic systems presented itself, and there can be little doubt that this would prove to be an extremely fruitful device.

Lévi-Strauss's interests were not in the sociology of modern society, however, but in that of 'primitive' society. According to Lévi-Strauss, 'the characteristic feature of the savage mind is its *timelessness*', but not because they never changed. On the contrary, he believed surviving primitive groups to be degenerate forms of antique societies and presented evidence of how groups had revised totemic practices to accommodate demographic change. But because they 'did not keep a diary', the origins of their culture was lost in time. Also, his focus of interest was not so much the productive practices which had been the focus of Marxist speculation, for example, but their theories of the universe, religious beliefs and kinship structures, and the claim that these were 'unmotivated' in de Saussure's sense, was plausible here. Lévi-Strauss said in fact that he would defer to Marx in respect to the reproduction of material life. So the 'etymology' of 'primitive' cultural practices was actually of fairly modest interest, and Lévi-Strauss showed how much could be learnt instead from a structural analysis of primitive ideology, while ignoring: historical development. the production and reproduction of material life, and the content of a totem or taboo (i.e., the animal or practice referred to). The erasure of history was not only possible and evidently useful but obligatory. To attempt to 'explain would we know little about by means of what we know absolutely nothing about' is an obviously fruitless, unscientific and ideological procedure. And Lévi-Strauss was absolutely right in this insofar as he is concerned with '*primitive*' communities whose past is solely a matter of speculation or mythology.

So by the end of the 1950s, Lévi-Strauss had developed a clear position on structural anthropology and was engaged in institutionalising the science within the French university system with himself at its head.

The Background to French Colonisation of Algeria

In October 1954, five months after France's disastrous defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the five 'historic leaders' of the various factions fighting for Algeria's liberation from France came together to form the National Liberation Front (FLN).

As a legacy of the Popular Front policies of the Comintern, the French Communist Party (PCF) still supported France's claim that Algeria was *part of France* - a reactionary farce of course, as Muslims (the word used at the time for the majority Arab population of Algeria) enjoyed *none* of the benefits of modernity to which the Europeans were entitled. The PCA, *Algerian section of the PCF*, however, had opted to support the independence war as early as 1952. In August 1955, an FLN massacre at Philippeville left scores of French *colons* dead, and marked the beginning of full-scale war. In July 1956, the PCA dissolved its trade union section into the FLN union federation and its members formed fighting groups within the FLN. Vast numbers of French 'paratroopers' controlled all the cities and instituted a regime of terror against the civilian population, the like of which has never been seen before or since. Many French intellectuals of this period were Algerians: Albert Camus, Jacques Derrida, François Lyotard, for example, were all Algerians, and Europeans were by no means immune from torture or assassination from either side. Algeria was not faraway Vietnam; the French had been trying to subdue Algeria since 1541, and Algerians had been French subjects since 1830 (after the slaughter of about a third of the entire population of the country). Algeria represented the last and closest of France's colonial possessions, and for any French person, an Algeria which was not French was almost inconceivable.

The French working class which formed the social base of the PCF was subject to racism, and the PCF felt under no pressure to follow the lead of its Algerian section and support self-determination for Algeria. However, 1960 marked the breach between the USSR and China which had been brewing ever since Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Congress in 1956. China was presenting itself as a rival on the left to Soviet leadership on the world scale and Mao Zedong promoted his policy of a revolution led by the rural peasantry to lay a claim for leadership of the burgeoning national liberation movement toppling former European colonies one by one. (The Mugabe regime is an example of the kind of leadership Chinese patronage promoted.) The more radical elements of Communist Parties everywhere followed the Chinese lead, while Guevara and Castro's victory in Cuba (1959), Lumumba's victory in the Congo (1960), and many other such struggles fostered a vision of world revolution growing out of the 'Third World'. On the other side politically, the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution was widely condemned, but the PCF did not yet distance itself from the Soviet Union, while for many young people Stalinism was becoming discredited. After all, if 'Soviet imperialism' had a right to dominate Hungary, why object to French imperialism in Algeria?

Although the Left supported the Algerians and were genuinely horrified by the depths of brutality to which the French military went in suppressing the revolution, the watchword was 'reconciliation' not 'self-determination'. But as the violence escalated on both sides, reconciliation became an increasingly irrelevant pipe dream. Albert Camus had been the principal spokesperson for reconciliation. Camus died on 4 January 1960, but for a time before receiving the Nobel Prize in December 1957, came under fire from both sides and, faced with an impossible choice between Algeria and France, he ceased speaking in

public altogether. Meanwhile, other French intellectuals were being murdered or tortured by one side or the other.

Not long after the massacre in Philippeville in August 1955, in his only previous public position on Algerian, Lévi-Strauss had broken ranks with the pro-reconciliation Comité d'Action formed by members of the French intelligentsia, and put his name to a call for self-determination for Algeria. In 1993 however, Lévi-Strauss admitted to James Le Sueur that "he regretted taking some of the positions he had during the French-Algerian war because, as he said, the civil war during the 1990s had made it painfully clear to him that the Algerians were not ready for self-rule." He expressed similar sentiments in a 1980 interview:

Certainly, I was ardently for decolonisation, and the independence of the peoples whom ethnologists study. But today, I am no longer certain that I was right, at least from all points of view ... Because the people in whom the ethnologists interest themselves, that is the ethnic minorities, are today - in societies which, no doubt, have recovered their national sovereignty - in a situation often more tragic than that which was theirs in the colonial epoch. Think of the Montagnards of Vietnam.

The Immediate Context of the Publication of "The Savage Mind"

In February 1958, PCA member Henri Alleg published the report of his torture at the hands of French paras, as it became clear that fascism threatened mainland France and the state itself. The Algerian crisis brought down the Fourth Republic and a new constitution was introduced in October 1958 under the leadership of General de Gaulle. The FLN's war of independence culminated in victory on 5 July 1962 a few months after publication of "The Savage Mind." Shortly before Lévi-Strauss had begun writing in June 1961, 2,400 armed insurgents tried to stage a coup in Paris and General de Gaulle called on conscripts to disobey orders and sabotage the actions of their commanders who had seized power in Algeria. As Lévi-Strauss began writing, sentences were handed down on the putschists as the fascist OAS renewed its terrorist attacks and assassinations. Lévi-Strauss completed the work on 16 October 1961 as 25,000 Muslims broke curfew to demonstrate peacefully through Paris:

"Between August and October 1961 the FLN killed eleven policemen in France, and many more were wounded. During this same period the police mounted a mini dirty war against the Algerian community, with uncounted numbers of Algerians killed, 'disappeared', or found floating in the Seine. Police organizations called for drastic measures from the government, and Papon, in a speech at a policeman's funeral, informed them: 'For each blow received, we'll respond with ten'. On October 5 he put in place a curfew covering all 'French Muslims from Algeria'.

"In response, the FLN decided to reply with a mass action. So on October 7 it called a halt to armed actions in France, and on October 10 issued instructions for a boycott of the curfew, a general strike, and demonstrations. The peaceful nature of the demonstrations was stressed, as was caution in face of the forces of repression. The Algerian community was warned as well of the need to be prepared for arrests. They had even gone so far as to prepare the slogans to be chanted in defense of any Algerians arrested during the demonstrations.

"But the police were in an overheated state, and when the demonstrations finally occurred at various locations in Paris, the police went after the

Algerians with a vengeance. Demonstrators were beaten and, as the events continued, the police began firing on the unarmed and peaceful demonstrators. Aside from the shooting and the beating, men were tossed into the Seine. For hours anyone who appeared to be Algerian was at risk of losing his or her life. “More than 10,000 Algerians were arrested and interned in several locations in Paris and its suburbs. There, too, the shooting continued, as did deaths from untreated wounds. In all, the number of dead varies from a low of 40, issued by a government commission in 1998, to almost 400.” [Mitch Abidor, marxists.org]

Meanwhile, at very great personal risk, the members of Jeanson’s underground network supported draft dodgers and channelled support to the FLN, but in general, the Left failed to win public opinion to support of Algerian independence as France teetered on the brink of civil war.

It is frequently overlooked however that it was the attack on Jean-Paul Sartre in “The Savage Mind” that was Lévi-Strauss’s principal political statement on the question of the Algerian War and national self-determination in general, and it is this statement, in the last chapter of the book, which has been profoundly influential. Is it conceivable that a major book by a leading French intellectual published at such a seminal moment in French history, including a withering attack on the most prominent public supporter of the FLN was ‘non-political’?

Jean-Paul Sartre was easily the most well-known and prominent intellectual in France at the time. Whereas Camus and others had held back from giving unconditional or practical support to the FLN, Sartre gave unambiguous support to the leaders of the Algerian independence struggle. His close supporter, Francis Jeanson, had organised an underground movement to support the FLN and assist draft resisters, and Frantz Fanon, the French-educated Caribbean intellectual who had become the FLN’s official spokesperson and philosophical voice. Sartre saw Mao’s conception of a world revolution led by the poor peasantry as the key to the Algerian Revolution. Sartre was not a member of the PCF, but recognising that Marxism, through the agency of the Communist Party, was in actuality the leadership of the organised working class, he developed an independent Marxist position. He combined Marxism with his earlier Existentialist philosophy and a Kojèvean reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. In 1960, he published *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, a huge unstructured tome, the drift of which was to create a non-metaphysical Hegel by basing a conception of spirit on the dynamics of human groups. This book included a refutation of the reactionary Comintern policy on Algeria and a critique of Stalinism and the degeneration of the Soviet Union, and used as its theme an analysis of the French Revolution. *Critique* was a slap in the face for the PCF and staked Sartre’s claim for recognition as the leading theorist of revolutionary Marxism. Although not prominent in *Critique*, along with de Beauvoir and Fanon, Sartre had also adopted Kojève’s trope of the master-slave dialectic to theorise the struggle for recognition and national independence. This trope elevates Hegel’s remarks about the struggle for recognition entailing a fight to the death into a dogma that national identity can only be created in and through cathartic violence. This provided a philosophical cover for not only supporting the counter-violence of the FLN as a necessary evil incurred in the fight against French military repression, but in its own right, as a necessary rite of passage for the Algerian people.

Socialist Historicism and “Cultural Evolutionism”

Immanuel Kant had understood himself to be expressing the ethos of his epoch, but for him the Enlightenment represented humanity’s coming of age. Having emerged from its childhood, human beings now had the benefit of Pure Reason which was itself timeless. It was Hegel who first introduced an explicitly and thoroughly historical conception of truth. Hegel’s view of the place history in science is complex and we will limit ourselves here to his observation in his *Philosophy of Right*:

“The science of right is a *part of philosophy*. Hence it must develop the idea, which is the reason of an object, out of the conception. It is the *same thing* to say that it must regard the peculiar internal development of the thing itself. Since it is a part [of philosophy], it has a definite beginning, which is the result and truth of what goes before, and this, that goes before, constitutes its so-called proof. Hence the origin of the conception of right falls *outside* of the science of right.” [Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*]

While the foregoing quote shows that Hegel’s conception of historicity is somewhat more nuanced than might have been supposed, there is no doubt that his conception of ‘formations of consciousness’ and his conception of world history, along with other theories of the early nineteenth century, such as the sociology of Auguste Comte, Darwin and Lamarck’s theory of biological evolution, and the speculations of the political economists, formed the philosophical justification for what Lévi-Strauss referred to as ‘cultural evolutionism’. Indeed, by the middle of the nineteenth century, historicism of one kind or another was ubiquitous in social philosophy. But in relation to the decolonisation of Algeria and the events of that time, it is historicism of the French working class and socialist intelligentsia which is at issue, not the theories of nineteenth century philosophers. But a number of different ideas are closely intertwined here.

The first thing to take note of is that it was not Marx or any other philosopher who introduced historicism into the workers’ movement; Marx joined a workers’ movement which was *already* thoroughly committed to what I will call ‘socialist historicism’. The workers movement saw their struggle for self-emancipation in terms of advance towards the socialist ideal and inscribed that ideal on its union banners with rising suns, rainbows, lighthouses and optimistic slogans emblazoned in gold type. This historical optimism which was mobilised by the socialist movement of which Marx became a leading theorist, embraced a conception of social progress, directed at their own social conditions, and aimed at overcoming deprivation, ignorance and inequality by helping history forward, so to speak, to a superior form of society. It is in fact hardly conceivable that any movement which aims to deal with the ills of its own society by means of the overthrow of all existing social conditions should believe anything *other* than that it shall bring about a intellectually higher and morally superior form of society. And in fact, Claude Lévi-Strauss himself would not deny this. To believe that instituting this or that change in one’s own existing social arrangements would bring about a superior state of affairs is so fundamental to participation in social life in any but the most hide-bound conservative society that it is simply impossible to imagine otherwise. At this point it is necessary to look at what Lévi-Strauss claimed in the famous final chapter of *The Savage Mind*, “History and Dialectic.”

Claude Lévi-Strauss on “History and Dialectic”

It must first be noted that some of the claims in this chapter are exaggerated and unsustainable and are contradicted by Lévi-Strauss himself, either in later years or within the text itself. This gives the chapter its striking rhetorical character. But there remain claims which are sustainable and constitute the key focus of this article.

Lévi-Strauss does not actually claim that history (i.e., the telling of history) is a free invention; history is constructed by the stringing together of events and personages whose relations are not objectively given, outside of the immediate course of events itself; their significance for those who are involved, have some practical relation to the events, is, just as for any other sensual image, a construction made by a subject who finds meaning in it and uses it. But when Lévi-Strauss says that the ‘history [of the French Revolution] plays exactly the part of a myth for Sartre’, he does not mean that these events are ‘mythical’, in the sense of being simply products of social imagination. And when he goes on to say that ‘the contemporary Frenchman must believe in this myth [of the French Revolution] in order fully to play the part of an historical agent’ it is clear that the French Revolution and its significance is, so to speak, ‘built in’ to modern French society, which is a child of that Revolution. Other things may well have happened in the past, but this particular series of events, as self-constructed by its participants and its progenitors, is part of the ethos of French society, just as is the language, religion, marriage customs, economic practices, etiquette and so on, of France. The national myths play a central and important role in the identity and conduct of the nation, as well as providing pragmatic data insofar as a spectator shares similar or common experience. But ‘Thought is powerless to extract a scheme of interpretation from events long past’, he says, so once the imprint of a series of events fades from social life, the stories we tell of it become truly *arbitrary*: why tell one story rather than another, except for the real threads and institutions which connect us to events that are significant to us today?

In relation to ‘cultural evolutionism’, Lévi-Strauss is prepared to accept that the effectiveness of social arrangements can be measured objectively in connection with any one particular task, be it moderating social conflict, producing metallurgical commodities for exchange, feeding the people, or whatever. Consequently, it is reasonable to say that, *in respect to a particular given task*, one society is superior to another. In fact, it is usually just such comparisons that motivate social change or motivate people to migrate. But in making such comparisons, it is not taken into account that the given task or function may be central for one society and peripheral for another, and consequently, even indefinitely many such comparisons cannot establish the relative superiority of one society over another overall, just as it is often the unforeseen consequences of a social change intended to resolve one set of problems that produce a negative outcome for the society in other respects. Insofar as a society constitutes a totality, then just so far is it untenable to make the kind of overall comparisons and this justifies the moral critique of theories of cultural evolution. So this has to be taken into account in the telling of history; history is ‘history-for’, history for a given society and in respect to certain problems or classes in that society.

Finally, moving to the specifics of French society and the Left intelligentsia in France. The founding of the modern French state is almost unique in history. It was created not just in the name of the French citizen, but of all mankind. The document adopted by the Constituent Assembly in June 1789 is headed *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the*

Citizen. This principle was taken into practice in the years afterwards as the French state mobilised its people to export the humanism of the Revolution to its neighbours.

Likewise, the Russian Revolution was made in the name, not of the Russian people, but in the name of the proletariat of the whole world, and instituted in the shape of the Comintern and the Red Army, charged with spreading the Revolution to the rest of the world. Thus the French left intelligentsia saw itself not just as representatives and critics of French society, but as the *avant garde* of *world society*. Lévi-Strauss conceptualises this relationship in terms of the narrative into which Sartre (for example) inserted himself, that is to say a conception of emergent world history, involving the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution and a world revolution, now, with the Chinese Revolution, to be led by the impoverished peasantry of the ex-colonial countries.

Critique of Dialectical Reason had been published in 1960, but in September 1961, only a few weeks before Lévi-Strauss completed work on the last chapter of “The Savage Mind,” Sartre published his Preface to Fanon’s “Wretched of the Earth,” excerpts from which were published separately in *Jeune Afrique*. The Preface was only 8,000 words, lacked the philosophical arabesques of *Critique* and is quite explicit. For example:

“all [classes in Algeria] fall into line with the stand made by the rural masses, that veritable reservoir of a national revolutionary army; for in those countries where colonialism has deliberately held up development, the peasantry, when it rises, quickly stands out as the revolutionary class. For it knows naked oppression, and suffers far more from it than the workers in the towns, and in order not to die of hunger, it demands no less than a complete demolishing of all existing structures. In order to triumph, the national revolution must be socialist; if its career is cut short, if the native bourgeoisie takes over power, the new State, in spite of its formal sovereignty, remains in the hands of the imperialists. ... This is what Fanon explains to his brothers in Africa, Asia and Latin America: we must achieve revolutionary socialism all together everywhere, or else one by one we will be defeated by our former masters.”

Lévi-Strauss did not direct his attack against this overtly political statement although there is every reason to believe that he found it politically objectionable, because to have entered into the political fray ran contrary to wearing the mantle of scientific distance, and he directed his fire against Sartre’s *philosophy of history* outlined in the *Critique*. A philosophical attack on Jean-Paul Sartre in Lévi-Strauss’s most popular and comprehensive presentation of his scientific theory, at this juncture, with Sartre the leading advocate of the FLN and France on the brink of civil war, was bound to guarantee Lévi-Strauss a wide audience and maximise both the *political* impact of his work as well as his own status as an intellectual. This is over and above the need Lévi-Strauss felt to respond to what he saw as Sartre’s attack on the ethos of science (under the name of ‘analytical reason’) upon which Lévi-Strauss depended for his authority, Sartre’s dehumanisation of ‘primitive’ people on the basis that without history they could not be fully human (as Lévi-Strauss read it), and the explicit denial to ‘primitive’ people of an intelligence like our own (a widespread idea among Marxists derived from Marx and Engels’ reading of 19th century ethnology) including Sartre’s citing of Lévi-Strauss’s own research, and Sartre’s concept of an Other which could not be understood - surely whether the object of science, is human or not, is always an Other, and doesn’t science demand such otherness as a requirement for the work of science?

An attack on Sartre at this moment was, in any case, necessarily an attack on the policy of support for the FLN (just as Sartre's highly philosophical *Critique* was a thinly disguised political attack on the Communist Party). However, Lévi-Strauss declared that Sartre had failed to recover a universal theory of knowledge by his non-metaphysical interpretation of Hegel developed in the *Critique*:

“Sartre in fact becomes the prisoner of his Cogito: Descartes made it possible to attain universality, but conditionally on remaining psychological and individual; by sociologizing the Cogito, Sartre merely exchanges one prison for another. Each subject's group and period now take the place of timeless consciousness. Moreover, Sartre's view of the world and man has the narrowness which has been traditionally credited to closed societies.”

And Lévi-Strauss repeats in several different forms this allegation that Sartre's philosophical history is just as insular as that of the 'primitive', and consequently the imposition of this perspective of societies which have been constituted through other histories is illegitimate. Sartre had attempted, Lévi-Strauss charged, to sever the bridge between man and nature, but alternatively:

“Sartre resigns himself to putting a 'stunted and deformed' humanity on man's side, but not without implying that its place in humanity does not belong to it in its own right and **is a function only of its adoption by historical humanity: either because it has begun to internalize the latter's history** in the colonial context, or because, thanks to anthropology itself, historical humanity has given the blessing of meaning to an original humanity which was without it. Either way the prodigious wealth and diversity of habits, beliefs and customs is allowed to escape; and it is forgotten that each of the tens or hundreds of thousands of societies which have existed side by side in the world or succeeded one another since man's first appearance, has claimed that it contains the essence of all the meaning and dignity of which human society is capable and, reduced though it may have been to a small nomad band or a hamlet lost in the depths of the forest, its claim has in its own eyes rested on a moral certainty comparable to that which we can invoke in our own case. But whether in their case or our own, a good deal of egocentricity and naivety is necessary to believe that man has taken refuge in a single one of the historical or geographical modes of his existence, when the truth about man resides in the system of their differences and common properties.”

That is to say, that Sartre allows humanity to the 'primitive' only to the extent that the 'primitive' has been incorporated into and has itself accepted the 'world history' of the French, Russian and Chinese Revolutions.

Continuing his attack on Sartre's use of history, Lévi-Strauss says:

“one is hard put to it to see whether it is meant to be the history men make unconsciously, history of men consciously made by historians, the philosopher's interpretation of the history of men or his interpretation of the history of historians. The difficulty becomes even greater, however, when Sartre endeavours to explain the life and thought of the present or past members **not of his own society but of exotic societies.**”

Lévi-Strauss's Charge against Sartre

The essence of Lévi-Strauss's charge against Sartre is that whilst the French state had colonised Algeria by military force, Sartre had subjected Algeria to an *epistemological*

colonisation, by winning the FLN leadership to a narrative of cathartic Maoist world revolution, a narrative in which the organised working class and intellectuals of Europe were the authors, a narrative which would see Algeria - including the Kabyle, Chaoui, Mozabite and Tuareg people that Lévi-Strauss was interested in, like the indigenous people of Brazil, the Montagnards of Vietnam and the ethnic minorities in Bangladesh - would be subsumed into that very monoculture that Lévi-Strauss so loathed. Where the paratroopers had failed, Sartre had succeeded, according to Lévi-Strauss.

“History is therefore never history, but history-for.”

and Lévi-Strauss continues in a footnote:

“Quite so, will be the comment of the supporters of Sartre. But the latter’s whole endeavour shows that, though the subjectivity of history-for-me can make way for the objectivity of history-for-us, the ‘I’ can still only be converted into ‘we’ by condemning this ‘we’ to being no more than an ‘I’ raised to the power of two, itself hermetically sealed off from the other ‘we’s. The price so paid for the illusion of having overcome the insoluble antinomy (in such a system) between myself and others, consists of the assignation, by historical consciousness, of the metaphysical function of Other to the Papuans. By reducing the latter to the state of means, barely sufficient for its philosophical appetite, historical reason abandons itself to a sort of intellectual cannibalism much more revolting to the anthropologist than real cannibalism.”

According to Lévi-Strauss’s student, the young Pierre Bourdieu who had been doing field work in Algeria at this time: “The Algerian peasantry” was “completely overwhelmed by the war, by the concentration camps, and by the mass deportations. To claim that it was a revolutionary peasantry was completely idiotic,” and he went to claim that the strategy to which the leaders of the FLN had been won was completely inappropriate for Algeria.

It is clear from his later statements as well as from his signature to the Ethnologists Letter of May 1956, that Lévi-Strauss had been a supporter of Algerian independence, but he also knew that the marginalised tribal people that he so much admired would most likely suffer more under an FLN government than they had under French colonialism. (In an aside about 18th Century France, Lévi-Strauss shows how the ‘side of the oppressed’ can switch back and forth according to the historical perspective, and this aside can be interpreted in terms of the relativity of the identity of the oppressed in the case of Algeria.)

So Lévi-Strauss *saw himself as going further* than Sartre in advocacy of self-determination for the people of Algeria. After 1956, the French intelligentsia had abandoned its stance of “objectivity” in which it would support the Algerian people but not take sides between the various factions in the liberation struggle and their programs. But only Sartre, Francis Jeanson and a relatively small number had unambiguously nailed their colours to the mast of the FLN and unambiguously endorsed its strategy and tactics. Lévi-Strauss was now going one step further, though, in its immediate political implications it amounted to a ***brazen retreat*** from the courageous stand taken by Sartre, Fanon and Jeanson.

The national liberation movements themselves had originated as a rejection of the post-World War Two compromise between the great capitalist powers and the Soviet Union and organised working class in the West. Stalin had cut a deal to divide up the world between Britain, the US and the USSR and a series of nation-building and welfare projects underwritten by US gold, had given the workers of the West respite from the

suffering of the War and the Depression. But Yugoslavia, which was to be given back to the King, Greece which was to be given to the British, Vietnam, which was to be given back to France, Egypt to the British, US hegemony over Latin America, ... all across the world, the people who had been cut out of this rotten deal decided to write their own narrative. This narrative was largely the *same one* which Sartre and Fanon were advocating for Algeria and which Castro and all the other national liberation leaders had embraced - *the right to determine and make their own way to modernity*, but a modernity which everyone conceived in more or less the same terms, give or take a capitalist or Soviet model of development here or there.

For Lévi-Strauss, it would be right and proper for a citizen of France to act in accordance with the narratives of which modern French society was participant and author, but subsuming Algeria under the myth of the French, Russian and Chinese Revolutions was no different from the subsumption of Algeria under French law and French national sovereignty.

But this does not exhaust the issue. It was Lévi-Strauss who was first to theorise the *narrative of the excluded* and the possibility that not only would the marginalised people on the fringes of the capitalist world want to write their own story, but they might want to write a quite different ending.

History and Science

Lévi-Strauss reminded us that (the writing of) history, like any other product of perception is a construct; as he said, it is 'history-for'. So history is also a norm of social life, which helps individuals to constitute their identity as part of a multiplicity of narratives, which help us all find a place and understand where we have come from and where we are going.

Lévi-Strauss pointed to a number of different kinds of history.

Biographical and anecdotal history, whether Biblical stories or the histories of the French Revolution, once the events have moved into the distant past, come under the category of mythology. In a culture where there is a continuity of written records, these kind of narratives always remain constructions, as do all acts of perception, and may be more or less fallible, but there is *no reason* to dismiss this kind of knowledge as products of the imagination. They are objects of science like anything else. In those cultures where there is no written record, then this kind of history is either constructed *from outside*, and is therefore questionable in the sense that the reconstructed whole is foreign to the parts – what one could call an amalgam.

Secondly, objective scientific investigations allow, even in the case of a non-literate culture, general descriptions of aspects of culture and changes therein to be made even from the outside. Lévi-Strauss himself gives at the very end of "The Savage Mind" an example of this kind of history, surely the mother of all "master narratives," which I will quote in full:

"Certainly the properties to which the savage mind has access are not the same as those which have commanded the attention of scientists. The physical world is approached from opposite ends in the two cases: one is supremely concrete, the other supremely abstract; one proceeds from the angle of sensible qualities and the other from that of formal properties. ... one which flowered in the Neolithic period, whose theory of the sensible order provided the basis of the arts of civilization (agriculture, animal husbandry, pottery, weaving,

conservation and preparation of food, etc.) and which continues to provide for our basic needs by these means; and the other, which places itself from the start at the level of intelligibility, and of which contemporary science is the fruit.”

Where the historian attempts to totalise the knowledge gained of a given culture, in what Hegel called “Universal History,” then necessarily the result must be the more problematic, because the same problem of bringing elements into combination with one another from outside, that is, according to a rationale which is *not immanent in the subject itself*, is posed. But what Hegel calls “Particular History,” history which confines itself to this or that particular aspect of life, may retain a claim to truth.

What Hegel called “Original History,” that is to say those documents which directly express the period of the times in which they are written, remain of course of value for just what they are, in general the very elementary traces from which history is written, and it was in that sense that Lévi-Strauss somewhat ironically appreciated Sartre’s *Critique*, as a document which expressed the ethos of a current of thought in modern France. And likewise does “The Savage Mind” express the ethos of its author. The privilege of writing the “Critical History” of the times falls only to the writer who revisits the site of conflict after dusk.

These observations bring into focus the old adage that history is written by the victors, of which the converse is also true: those who get to write the history are the ultimate victors. Whenever history is written, whenever it is made, there are those who are excluded and we live in a times when there is a great deal of sensitivity to the view from beneath, and Lévi-Strauss, having a mind to those who were being excluded from the writing of the story of Algerian independence, taught us a great deal about this and contributed so much to the way history is written and made today.

The Aftermath

The limitations of a humanism, presumptuous enough to believe that it could show the way to self-determination for those whose voice has not been heard, should be exposed. The conviction that all human beings are of equal moral worth, and to act on this, without waiting to be asked, is a risk for sure; there is self-determination and self-determination. Taken to an abstract extreme, the doctrine of unmediated self-determination and the philosophy of difference, can only lead to a nihilistic, individualist liberalism.

Lévi-Strauss’s response to the Algerian struggle for independence contributed absolutely nothing to the prospects for self-determination of the Berbers and Kabylie people and functioned as a rationale for abstaining from the struggle for the self-determination of the Algerian Arabs.

Lévi-Strauss made a scientific contribution here in showing exactly how Sartre was colonising the Algerians *epistemologically* by exporting into Algeria a philosophical doctrine which may or may not have proved to provide a rationale for a program of self-determination for Algeria. But one must act. Often, in retrospect we see that we could have acted better, and Lévi-Strauss has contributed to the science of making and writing history so that we can be more conscious of the spirit of our times and how we are acting out its dictates and those of our own social position.

But self-determination is not an absolute; one must first have a voice; within the relative of history—for there is always an element of the absolute. To fail to give solidarity out of

respect for self-determination is a cop-out, but even solidarity presupposes a voice, a demand for solidarity. The failure of French humanism to give effective support to the Algerian independence struggle struck a huge blow. The philosophical warfare between humanism and the philosophy of difference, which has carried on ever since Lévi-Strauss fired the first shot, has accompanied a terrible decline in social solidarity, and to a considerable degree it *reflects* that loss of solidarity. But at the same time, Lévi-Strauss's ideas went on to inform the struggle of other marginalised people who did find a voice and were able to utilise his insight to much better effect than he was himself able to.

Conclusion

We have in this article only touched on the fringes of problems of the philosophy of history. I just wish to make the point, which seems to have been overlooked by everyone in the 46 years since the publication of "History and Dialectic," that this seminal essay was prompted by the Algerian independence war, the civil war situation that it prompted in France and the movement of solidarity with Algeria on the French Left.

Directed against the most prominent and philosophically sophisticated of supporters of the Algerian struggle in France, the contradictory effect of "History and Dialectic" was to provide a cover for *abandoning solidarity* with the Arab struggle at the same time as *speaking up for the excluded*. The essay achieved this contradictory result by making a genuine and irreversible contribution to social philosophy, which both reflected the terminal crisis of the perspective of Third World-ist peasant revolution which ushered in the present period of postmodern capitalism, and distributed new philosophical weapons to groups who had never before had a voice on the public stage. It also provided new philosophical devices for conservatism to disguise itself in radical shape.

Bibliography

- Abidor, M., translations and essays on marxists.org, 2005-8.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *The Algerians*, 1962.
- Le Sueur, James D., *Uncivil War. Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonisation of Algeria*. University of Nebraska Press, 2001.
- Heartfield, J., *The 'Death of the Subject' Explained*, Sheffield Hallam University 2002.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *Structural Anthropology*, 1958.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 1949.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *Tristes tropiques*, 1955.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude et al, "The Ethnologists Letter," May 1956
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *The Savage Mind*, October 1961.
- Pace, David, *Claude Lévi-Strauss. The Bearer of Ashes*, Ark Paperbacks 1983.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, 1960.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, Preface to Frantz Fanon's "Wretched of the Earth," 1961.