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Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropology Confronts the Problems of the Modern World*. Foreword by Maurice Olender. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013. x + 129 pp. \$22.95 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-674-07290-9.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Other Face of the Moon*. Foreword by Junzo Kawada. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013. xiii + 166 pp. \$22.95 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-674-07292-3.

Review by Staffen Müller-Wille, University of Exeter.

No other anthropological author stretches the imagination as much as Claude Lévi-Strauss does. Born in 1908, his research agenda was profoundly shaped by late nineteenth-century anthropologists like Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881), James George Frazer (1854–1941) and Franz Boas (1858–1942). And yet, until his death in 2009, Lévi-Strauss never ceased to speak to the sensibilities of contemporary readers, and was an equally alert witness to the post-9/11 world, as he had been of the years leading up to the catastrophe of World War II. He produced intimate, first-hand accounts in his *Tristes tropiques* of the Caduevos, Bororo, Nambikwara and Tupi-Kawahib in western Brazil, but also of life in the nascent mega-cities of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Karachi, Dheli or New York, populated by migrants like himself.<sup>[1]</sup> And yet, Lévi-Strauss was equally able to reach the highest level of abstraction, processing information from a wide variety of cultures across the globe to produce his “structuralist” analysis of universal patterns underlying kinship systems and myths. He contributed incisively to the politics of race in the second half of the twentieth century, through his involvement in the formulation of the first UNESCO Statement on Race and subsequent publication of *Race and History* <sup>[2]</sup>, and a second time when he scandalized his audience in 1972 with a speech that defended ethnic autonomy and multiculturalism; and yet, Lévi-Strauss always stayed aloof of overt political affiliations and the polemics of day-to-day politics (with exception of a bout of socialism in his youth). Reading Lévi-Strauss is like being exposed to the images created by Google Earth; planetary views alternate with snippets of seemingly trivial street scenes, and yet it is all part of one navigable system.

The two slim volumes under review here are the latest additions to the overwhelming *oeuvre* of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and present an excellent opportunity for the uninitiated to grasp the intellectual breadth, analytical clarity, and inimitable style of this author. The French originals were published by Éditions du Seuil in 2011 from previously unpublished or obscure material. The first volume contains a series of three lectures delivered in Tokyo at the invitation of the Ishizaka Foundation, a foundation associated with the Japanese business organisation Keidanren that supports scholarly and cultural exchange programmes. The second volume contains eight occasional papers—including the preface to the 2002 Japanese edition of *Tristes Tropiques*—as well as one interview with the Africanist anthropologist Junzo Kawada, and a few personal photographs from mutual visits of Lévi-Strauss and Kawada. What joins the two volumes is their connection with Japan, a subject that had always fascinated Lévi-Strauss. In scope and style, however, they differ considerably, and work as stand-alone publications. The short forewords by Maurice Olender, a renowned historian of nineteenth-century racism, and Junzo Kawada unfortunately provide very little context, but the texts included are well able to speak for themselves.

*Anthropology Confronts the Problems of the Modern World* goes back to three lectures delivered in 1986, and yet it retains, as Olender rightly emphasizes in his foreword, astonishing timeliness almost three decades later. Lévi-Strauss had been asked by his hosts to address the theme of how “anthropology...views the fundamental problems now facing humanity” (p. 1), and he does so in three steps. In the first lecture, Lévi-Strauss develops what in his view is anthropology’s unique perspective and what role this academic discipline can play in solving contemporary problems. The two following lectures then apply this perspective to a number of problems, the second lecture confronting problems of a universal nature: “familial and social organization, economic life, and religious thought” (p. 45); and the third, problems that arise in the interstices of cultural diversity: “the problem of race, and the meaning to be given to the notion of progress” (p. 89).

The first lecture builds on a contrast between “Western-type” and “primitive” civilizations that most anthropologists of today would find hard to swallow, especially since Lévi-Strauss insists that anthropology continues to be defined by its preference for studying “primitive” societies (pp. 13-14). The characteristics he goes through to establish this contrast are familiar. Western-type civilizations are characterized by population growth, belief in scientific and technological progress, and communication through “written documents and administrative mechanisms” (p. 27), whereas their “primitive” counterparts “conceive of themselves in terms of stability” (p. 18) and are without writing. Yet, anthropology does not exhaust itself in the observation of properties of others. Its objectivity is of a different kind, according to Lévi-Strauss, since by the very act of observing others the anthropologist introduces alien concepts and notions into his or her own traditional way of thinking. In other words, what is constitutive of the object of anthropology is the very distance that separates anthropological observers from the societies they choose to observe. And to estimate and assess that distance, anthropologists have to adopt a perspective that places them both outside *and* inside their own tradition. Anthropology is “a technique of ‘making strange’” (p. 31), and builds on the insight “that no portion of humanity could aspire to understand itself except with reference to others” (p. 33).

This art is not a new one, as Lévi-Strauss points out, and it is not a unique possession of Western heritage. Japan had its equivalents in eighteenth-century travel writing and attempts to define its own essence by looking at the ancient cultures of China and Korea. But it has its times and places of virtuosity. Structuralism has often been criticized for its adherence to timeless and universal “binaries.” But every binary works two ways. A recurring theme in Lévi-Strauss writings on Japan assembled in the two volumes is the contrast between “centripetal” and “centrifugal” movement. Japanese carpenters will work wood by moving their tools towards their body, rather than away from it, as Europeans tend to do. This may reveal something about a “system of invariant differences...between...the Western soul and the Japanese soul”. But it also reveals, that the Japanese, too, have to saw and plane wood, or fry their food, in order to make a living. Different cultures present us with alternative ways of performing the same vital functions.

That Lévi-Strauss handled the tool-box of structuralism with versatility, rather than dogmatic rigor, becomes especially apparent if one moves on to the two remaining lectures on “great contemporary problems.” In the 1950s and 1960s, Lévi-Strauss had been very occupied with problems associated with what Paul E. Ehrlich called the “population bomb,” travelling Pakistan and India and directing social research, as Secretary General of the International Social Science Council, for UNESCO. His writings on the so-called “race problem”—“Race and History” (1952) and “Race and Culture” (1971)—have to be seen in this context, as Wiktor Stoczkowski has argued in *Anthropologies rédemptrices: Le monde selon Lévi-Strauss*, one of the most lucid books on Lévi-Strauss from recent years.[3] One would therefore expect that the topics of overpopulation, famine and ethnic conflict would loom large among the three “great contemporary problems” that Lévi-Strauss presented to his Japanese audience in 1986. But this is not the case. The three challenges Lévi-Strauss identifies are rather the advent of new reproductive technologies, economic exploitation of land and energy under capitalist conditions, and the crisis that Western science was beginning to experience in terms of its authority.

Lévi-Strauss reflections on the first of these challenges, especially his comparison of practices among the Yoruba with contemporary prospects of assisted reproduction for homosexual couples, are especially intriguing. This was six years before Marilyn Strathern's path-breaking *Reproducing the Future: Anthropology, Kinship, and the New Reproductive Technologies* [4], which treats Lévi-Strauss rather condescendingly, and one wonders how Lévi-Strauss's critical exhortations resonated in a country at the peak of its techno-scientific boom (Japan's first IVF baby was born in 1983 and its first asset price bubble was just beginning to form). In the last few paragraphs of the lecture, at least, Lévi-Strauss makes sure to clarify that Japan provides Europe and the United States with a kind of model, not only because it was one of the few non-Western nations that followed their economic and technological footsteps, but far more importantly, because it was able to do so while sustaining its "own formulas for living and thinking" (p. 122).

The other volume, entitled *The Other Face of the Moon*, assembles pieces of a lighter, sometimes esoteric tone. In them, Lévi-Strauss presents himself repeatedly as a mere amateur Japanologist. Perhaps for this very same reason, however, there is a lot to gain from the essays for the non-specialist (which includes the reviewer), while specialists will probably be able to tap them for sophisticated versions of late twentieth-century Orientalism. Notwithstanding his confession that he "knows absolutely nothing about the subject" of Japan (p. 42), Lévi-Strauss clearly knows a lot about Japanese music, theatre, visual art, literature, and material culture. Perhaps more of a connoisseur than an amateur, he thus takes his readers (and listeners) on little tours through the Japonica he was able to collect throughout his career to play the game of distancing and nearing, outlined at the beginning of this review.

Jōmon pottery and basketry from the archaic period seems wild? Lévi-Strauss points to "the lyrical abstraction and action painting of certain contemporary artists" (p. 20). Is Ryukyuan culture faithfully preserved in its matriarchal structure and rustic splendour due to its isolation on a string of remote islands? Lévi-Strauss highlights surprising parallels between local narratives and the *Odyssey*, which may be due to the influence of Portuguese traders in the seventeenth century. Does the appreciation of natural beauty in Japanese art and everyday culture really signify a more intimate relationship with nature? In fact, as Lévi-Strauss recalls from a trip on the Sumida river through Tokio, it coexists with extreme brutality towards the natural environment.

It would be impossible to go through the many themes and topics touched upon in the essays. These texts are occasional, and hence rather eclectic, pieces that do not try to substantiate a general doctrine, but are more of a literary-philosophical nature. But they preserve something of a young person's fascination with the wonders of the world, the young person Lévi-Strauss was when a century ago, in 1914, he began to receive Japanese prints from his father, a moderately well-known portraitist, as a gift in reward for high marks received at school. The passage of time, and the dislocations it produces, is perhaps the grand theme after all that occupied Lévi-Strauss throughout his life.

## NOTES

[1] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955).

[2] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History* (Paris: UNESCO, 1952).

[3] Wiktor Stoczkowski, *Anthropologies rédemptrices: Le monde selon Lévi-Strauss* (Paris: Hermann, 2008).

[4] Marilyn Strathern, *Reproducing the Future: Anthropology, Kinship, and the New Reproductive Technologies* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1992).

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