

Lévi-Strauss and Marxism

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The final pages of *Tristes Tropiques* present an unexpected, and rather incongruous, comparison between Buddhism and Marxism. Under the sign of Rousseau – to whom ‘every page of this book could have been dedicated’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 390) – the comparison falls under the categories of both daydream and confession. There can be no doubt that this is an expression of deep conviction, albeit in roundabout form. That is why it is not absurd to take this comparison as a starting point to measure what Marxism brought to structuralism, what impulse structuralism acquired from Marxism, or what structuralism owes to Marxism, despite any protests to the contrary. I will endeavor to do this through close reading of a text so deeply evocative that it is impossible to approach except on its own terms, including its most allegorical.

The passage introduces three great religious constructions as characters in an epic narrative: Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. And the idea around which the narrative revolves consists of presenting Islam as ‘the West of the East’.

From the outset, we might ask if this setup cannot simply be reduced to mere projection, a way for the wandering voyager to get his bearings without too much effort in a world that is not his own, but in which it is still possible to recognize a part of himself. In this case, however, the voyager is an ethnologist, and his voyage is a mental one. Thus the daydream, while it does not claim to possess scientific accuracy, carries the hallmark of the ethnologist’s self-conscious *déplacement*. More than a poorly controlled projection, we can recognize the outlines of a method. What the ethnologist has been able to observe of his own society, the West, is not the discontinuity produced by the encounter with another society; to the contrary, it is a sense of familiarity with other societies – in this case, the East – from the moment he manages to perceive, in their own plurality, an *internal difference*. A discontinuity, here, that from a certain angle reveals the silhouette of the West in the East.

Two truly structuralist methodological principles are at work in this form of objectivization. First, the structural discontinuity is not the same as a simple ethnological differentiation through in-depth comparison between two compact, monolithic entities. The comparison is, rather, a comparison of discontinuities: as Lévi-Strauss would claim in *Totemism*, it is not resemblances but rather differences that resemble each other. The ethnologist owes the objectivity of his methods of understanding to his ability to relate discrete, internally differentiated figures to one another, figures that must first be constructed by the other. But the other is not a simple character. It does not

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possess the homogeneity of a positive subject, wrapped up in itself, lacking internal tensions. To the contrary, it is only in its fully unraveled, differentiated form that it gives itself up for comparison. In this sense, ethnological comparison necessarily takes on a formal character.

As for the second principle, it is in fact implied by the first:

When an exotic custom fascinates us in spite of (or on account of) its apparent singularity, it is generally because it presents us with a distorted reflection of a familiar image, which we confusedly recognize as such without yet managing to identify it. (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 238–239)

This passage of *The Savage Mind* discusses totemism and, more specifically, the misinterpretation of the *churinga* of the Australian Aranda, those polished pieces of wood or stone which first prompted serious reflection on ‘totemic representation’. A distorted reflection produces a sense of familiarity that resists identification while retaining something of the perceived similarity. It is the reason why the familiar also produces a certain feeling of strangeness, provoking *ad hoc* reactions. In the case of Islam, a similar drift takes place: unable to identify just what about it is similar to ourselves, we place it into the category of a constructed strangeness, and separate ourselves from it all the more as we ‘confusedly’ perceive that it actually resembles us. The scheme is additionally complicated in this instance because the discontinuity by which Islam resembles us is, in fact, *the same* as that which prevents us from grasping it, and identifying it. The obstacle and the means to resolve it become confused. This is why, as we shall see, one has to introduce a third figure, the only solution to extricate ourselves from this impasse. The intervention of a third entity proves to be necessary in order to free our vision and give it space: Buddhism arrives to serve this purpose, its intervention allowing us to see what we are and what Islam is, each with respect to the other, and both with respect to Buddhism.

What about that perspective that combined the foreign and the familiar? How does the ‘distorted reflection’ work in the first place? This is the observation of the traveling ethnologist upon his return to his native society:

In Moslems and French people alike, I observe the same bookish attitude, the same Utopian spirit and the stubborn conviction that it is enough to solve problems on paper to be immediately rid of them. Behind the screen of a legal and formalist rationalism, we build similar pictures of the world and society in which all difficulties can be solved by a cunning application of logic, and we do not realize that the universe is no longer made up of the entities about which we are talking. Just as Islam has kept its gaze fixed on a society which was real seven centuries ago, and for the problems of which it then invented effective solutions, so we are incapable of thinking outside the framework of an epoch which came to an end a century and a half ago, and which was the one period when we were in tune with history – only too briefly, however, since Napoleon, that Mohammed of the West, failed where the other succeeded. Like the Islamic world, the France which emerged from the revolution suffered the inevitable fate of repentant revolutionaries, which is to become the nostalgic preservers of a state of things with regard to which they once stood in a dynamic relationship. (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 405)

Islam stood out, then, for its abstract legal character, designed for the construction of a system of norms applicable *ne varietur* to every problem that a society might face in the course of its development. A system that, ‘one day’, revealed itself to be effective and capable of shifting with the prevailing current, a type of social regulation that, at a particular moment in time, was able to align itself with history and all the problems it posed, impose its law and move decisively in the direction of history. With this Lévi-Strauss describes a tendency he believed to be common to all revolutionaries, who tended to become ‘nostalgic preservers’ indifferent or even hostile toward the continual movement of history – since this movement is not that of a society constructed as an

artificial or hypostatic mechanism, but of a society *in* the world, world and society bound together, carried along by a common dynamic. We must note, however, that while the reference to the revolutionary doctrine that we have inherited seems clear enough, here it gives our conservatism an even more paradoxical flavor: since it is precisely with the help of the word *history*, referring exclusively to the society of men, and not to society *and* its natural world, that we try to justify our conservatism as nostalgic revolutionaries. From this we can already perceive the contribution of Marxism: as an alternative theory of history, different from that of a revolution which degenerated into conservatism. That this is an adequate way of approaching what could be called a *materialistic* theory of history – a theory of history that views society as an evolving organism plunged into a physical reality itself subject to variation; a theory designed to identify the historical problems that unfold like so many unforeseen configurations of relationships in a society very much of its world – this is what we are led to believe.

But before going forward, we must return to our comparison. Seen in this way, what does Islam teach us about *ourselves*? What do we see in this distorted reflection? We see a religion that claims to have invented tolerance, and is so proud of itself that it cannot even imagine that it might not be accepted by the other cultures with which it enters into contact, precisely because it flaunts its patent superiority by tolerating them, respecting what they are by assuming a form comprehensive enough to swallow them all. This is the tolerance trap, which immediately brings to mind an analogy with the trap in the revolution of the rights of man. If by tolerance we mean the superiority *to be able to tolerate* – an indication of *grandeur* which becomes a justification for its own well-meaning imposition – then tolerance is transformed into its opposite: it does not allow actual difference, but employs a formal concept of difference to abolish it in reality. Literally, it does not allow what it tolerates to exist, precisely because it exerts its superiority over it through having tolerated it. And the root of this tendency, clearly, can be found in its first detachment, its first source of pride: that of having ‘one day’ established a system of perfectly relevant social norms, of having made them the key to all possible social development, without seeing that it could only presume their relevance through proof of their inscription in a specific society in a specific world. Without seeing, that is, that their relevance could only be measured by their ability to handle the problems faced by a culture in its relationship with the world, and that this relationship, itself, was inevitably destined to change.

To put it simply, Islam, like all of modern society, is the product of an absolutization. And it exerts its control over other societies in complete good faith. This situation reveals itself to the observer if they are able to discern and decipher two signs: first, the rigid and oppositional form assumed by the confrontation between Islam and the West – or rather, as we now understand, the two Wests, the West of the West and the West of the East; and second, the position occupied in our eyes by Buddhism, its functional singularity and its *un-familiar* strangeness – unlike that of Islam – for us as Westerners.

Let us examine these two signs one at a time. In our relationship with ‘others’ on a large scale, Lévi-Strauss took note of the particular place occupied by Muslims by virtue of the resemblance that ties us to them, and that undoubtedly has its origin, from the ethnologist’s point of view, in a common *guilt*. We both committed an analogous act with respect to the cultures we encountered. More profoundly, we transgressed against the world, against our natural gift, the environment in which our societies were and remain situated. The acts we committed were certainly not identical, much less interchangeable; inventing absolute tolerance, superior in its absolutism, and giving birth to the revolution of the rights of all men, wherever and whoever they are, do not draw upon the same types of laws or the same idea of law itself – and they do not produce, in reality, the same normative effects. But at a certain level of analysis, the action is the same, in relationship to the implied hypostasis on both sides. For this reason, the comparison between the two forms must necessarily take on the form of competition and closure. What is compared, in this case, are two

figures that typify superiority with regard to nature, to history, and to the cultures that do not adopt this stance toward nature and history.

This is, then, the characterization of our common spirit, which, in the final chapter of *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss called *l'esprit molaire* (the 'molar spirit'). The adjective is curious. Rather than understand it in terms of its chemical meaning – a 'molar spirit' would be a spirit on too large a scale, too high a plane, indifferent to the internal composition of its bodies and which sees only second-level aggregates – we shall privilege a more trivial, less technical meaning: something is molar if it takes the form of the Latin *mola*, millstone, something used to grind food, as in the case of the molar tooth. In this case, molar spirits are those that grind against each other, a functional similarity that inexorably implies a confrontation. Now, what is it that they grind, exactly? It is here that Lévi-Strauss' thought acquires a more directly political valence, which no longer concerns merely an exterior confrontation between two vast cultural blocs, but the concrete way of life of each of the social types concerned, their socio-economic functioning – a plane that, in essence, turns out to be critical for understanding the structure of opposition in which they find themselves on an international level. Their similarity, and the conflict it produces, becomes more obvious. And the identity of the two Wests becomes clearer:

In our case, the paradox lies in the fact that the majority of the dependent populations we are concerned with are Moslem, and that the cultural steamrolling to which both they and we are prone has too many features in common for us not to be antagonistic to each other – on the international level, I mean, since the differences spring from a confrontation between two bourgeoisies. Political oppression and economic exploitation have no right to look for excuses among their victims. However, if France, with her 45 million inhabitants, generously offered equal rights of citizenship to 25 million Moslem citizens, even though a large proportion of them are illiterate, this would be no bolder a step than the one which saved America from remaining an insignificant province of the Anglo-Saxon world. When the citizens of New England decided a century ago to authorize immigration from the most backward regions of Europe and the most impoverished strata of society and to allow themselves to be swamped by the invasion, they gambled and won, and the stake was just as important as the one we refuse to risk. (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 405–406)¹

If the context of decolonization weighed heavily on these observations – a note in the second edition reminded readers that these words were written in 1954–1955, when France found itself confronting the Algerian crisis – it is nevertheless clear that, for Lévi-Strauss, judgment of the molar spirit carried with it a global condemnation of the economic exploitation and political oppression of which both Islam and the West were in fact the standard bearers, all the more guilty because they each arrogated their own right to make excuses to their victims, the exploited and oppressed within each bloc. We might, in contrast, discern what would become a genuine rupture with these molar spirits' logic of confrontation: this consisted of resolutely exposing, in a situation in which economic and demographic problems of a new type were arising, a demographic outpouring that operated on a completely different level from that of the dominant classes – the opposite of a 'selective immigration', since this was not at all a case of an elite getting to pick and choose according to aims fully congruent with the structures of exploitation inherent in capitalism. This risky opening, barely a decade after the massive depopulation of Europe due to the Second World War,² should be seen as analogous to that which America experienced in the nineteenth century, when it allowed itself to be submerged by a wave of immigration *from below*, precisely because it sought to follow the direction of history and not to attempt to dictate its own law in terms of a pre-established normative system.

Be that as it may, the solution outlined here does not change the fundamental facts of the problem. Because the outpouring, the confluence at work on a level other than that of the 'two bourgeoisies', does not affect the nature of these molar spirits. It is at this point that Lévi-Strauss'

meditation before the temples of Burma, the Buddhist monasteries of Taxila, and the dispersed stelae of Delhi or Calcutta, comes to the aid of our reflection.

The East cannot be reduced to Islam, which is nothing but 'its' West, as much our image in it as its image in us, as seen through the deformed lens of the distorted reflection. Restored to its internal discontinuity, in reality this makes it appear like two figures, in many ways antithetical to one another, at least if one places them on the same axis. The prophet of Islam, endowed with a messianic spirit of conquest, is diametrically opposed by the Buddhist sage, with his soothing virtues and confident faith in the course of events. Lévi-Strauss pushed the contrast further, employing femininity and the place reserved for it on both sides – devalued in one case, overvalued in the other – in the role of criteria of opposition.

Historically, Buddhism and Islam were separated by a period of 1,200 years; in the middle, equidistant from both extremes, Christianity arose as if in flight from the East, the West defining itself as a crucible of an opposition of a different type from that already existing within the East. How are we to read this sequence? By asking this question, the ethnologist lets his mind wander freely, creating an epic fantasy driven only by his desire to understand. Let us imagine, if only for a moment, that Christianity had arrived *after* Islam: one might suppose, in that case, that it would have assumed the task of subsuming the opposition from the East, which would have preceded it, and that it would have come to synthesize the two extremes. But that did not happen, and so instead Christianity introduced an additional contradiction, reduplicating internal opposition with external opposition, the latter overdetermining the former. From East to East, passing through the West, this was its path:

Mankind has made three major religious attempts to free itself from persecution by the dead, the malevolence of the Beyond and the anguish of magic. Over intervals of approximately five hundred years, it originated in turn Buddhism, Christianity and Islam; it is a striking fact that each stage, far from constituting an advance on the previous one, should be seen rather as a regression. For Buddhism, there is no Beyond: its whole teaching can be summarized as a radical criticism of life, such as humanity would never again be capable of, leading the sage to deny all meaning to beings and things: it is a discipline which abolishes the universe, and abolishes itself as a religion. Christianity, yielding again to fear, restored the other world, with its hopes, its threats and its last judgment. It only remained for Islam to bind this world to the other world: temporal and spiritual were brought together. The social order acquired the prestige of the supernatural order, and politics became theology. In the last resort, the spirits and phantoms, which superstition had always failed to bring to life, were replaced by masters who were only too real, and who were furthermore allowed to monopolize an after-life which added its burden to the already crushing weight of life here below. (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 408)

In the series of strategies with which man has reacted to his fear – fear of death, of the beyond, of supernatural powers – 'only the first initiative is wholly valid', that embodied by Buddhism. This goes back to the radical idea that beings and things have no meaning. It proceeds resolutely and definitively toward the refutation of all meaning, brusquely halting the human propensity to give meaning to reality, either inherent in mankind or in the world surrounding him. In sum, we find here the only true 'radical critique': that which expresses itself not with respect to a 'greater meaning' given to man, but with respect to the argument that, simply, one cannot 'give' meaning because reality intrinsically does not and can not have any. Buddhism traces an immediately obvious limit: that of a 'religion of the abolition of religion'. It argues for the absence of a beyond, and urges us to learn to appreciate this and live in conformity with it. The source of this absence cannot be traced back to our infirmity or inability to understand, but rather to the idea that the impossibility of our consciousness to fully realize itself is justified by the very existence of phenomena, which do not reveal their meaning to us for the simple reason that they do not possess any, and that for them this does not constitute a void or an absence, but simply a matter of fact.

Lacking any practical evidence, Christianity maintains the opposite of that position. It does so by restoring man's fear, arguing that it is not possible for the experience of an absence of meaning to be legitimate, and that it is necessary to find meaning beyond the plane of experience itself. This is why, for Lévi-Strauss, it stands out above all for having re-established the *other world*, with its hopes, its threats, its final judgment – judgment that will *finally* give meaning to everything that happens in life. And Islam, to the degree in which it succeeds Christianity, has nothing left to accomplish but complete the circle: it must reconstruct the link between the two distinct planes in such a way that the beyond, the source of all meaning, *already* exists here on earth, without losing any of its eminence. In this narrative, then, Islam not only agreed to reserve a space for spiritual power alongside temporal power, like the Christian church, but it also defined itself primarily by its intention to join them together, uniting them in such a way that theology becomes the other half of politics, and vice versa.

Quite clearly, this general narrative runs headlong into numerous obstacles in terms of political-theological history, in both the West and the East. To limit ourselves to a banal observation, one might ask, for example, how to read the Hobbesian synthesis that lies at the foundation of modern politics, itself deeply rooted in the Christian vision, which reunites the sword and the priest's scepter in the same hands under terrestrial sovereignty, that 'mortal god' that Hobbes called the Leviathan. Following the line of his narrative, one might imagine that Lévi-Strauss would not have seen anything more than the sign of an Islamization of Christian power. That is what he suggests immediately after, stating plainly that the crusades represented the beginning of a process that was less the Westernization of the East than the Easternization of the West – but an Easternization that came not from the East as such, but from the West of the East, an effect of the same distorted reflection that has us see in the other what, in reality, can already be found inside ourselves, all while believing the other to be *different* from what it is in reality.

If the West traces its internal tensions back to their source, it will see that Islam, by coming between Buddhism and Christianity, Islamized us at the time when the West, by taking part in the crusades, was involved in opposing it and therefore came to resemble it, instead of undergoing – had Islam never come into being – a slow process of osmosis with Buddhism, which would have Christianized us still further, and would have made us all the more Christian in that we would have gone back beyond Christianity itself. It was then that the West lost the opportunity of remaining female. (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 409)

So Buddhism *could have* allowed us to fulfill our Christianity if Islam had not stepped in to bind us more tightly to our fear and, thus, leave us destined to remain Christians in another sense. Where did the unheard-of privilege conceded to Buddhism – a largely metaphorical Buddhism, it must be said – as the first example of a religious spirit that represented a sort of golden age, thoroughly impregnated with femininity, come from? To understand this, one must return to the experience that Lévi-Strauss speaks of when he entered into a Buddhist temple and attended a ceremony. Far from feeling himself an intruder, a spectator forced to go through the motions, his participation possessed its own logic: 'there was no likelihood of misunderstanding'. He found himself witnessing a ceremony open to any stranger, free of any pressure upon him to claim an affiliation or creed. An occasional visitor, here he was immersed in an unanticipated religious celebration in which he felt in no way out of place, not needing even to make false gestures of worship. This was due to the fact that, it appeared, there was in Buddhism a practice open to everyone, a faith able to welcome inside even those who had no faith. Such openness, for Lévi-Strauss, had only one explanation: that it rested on an experience of thought, in the purest sense of the term. Worshipping the idol in the temple, one did not venerate any supernatural order, but merely paid homage to 'the decisive wisdom [of] a thinker'. One paid homage to his thought and, through that, to the society that had

produced him and that he in turn produced. That this society should have created the representation of a thinker from whole cloth, adopted it after the fact, and that there was in this great artifice, mattered little. The fundamental point was that an experience of thought was positioned at the very center of the faith. If this faith could exist, it was because it did not constrain the thinker within a specific social order, a normative constitution, a system of rules that it sought to impose upon the chaos of the world. Rather, it lay in meditation on the lack of meaning, on the way of approaching and attaining it. In taking this as its aim, it became possible to achieve a profound dynamic of thought in general, a movement inherent to the exercise of any thought cultivated anew from its beginning:

What else, indeed, have I learned from the masters who taught me, the philosophers I have read, the societies I have visited and even from that science which is the pride of the West, apart from a few scraps of wisdom which, when laid end to end, coincide with the meditation of the Sage at the foot of the tree? Every effort to understand destroys the object studied in favour of another object of a different nature; this second object requires from us a new effort which destroys it in favour of a third, and so on and so forth until we reach the one lasting presence, the point at which the distinction between meaning and the absence of meaning disappears: the same point from which we began. It is 2,500 years since men first discovered and formulated these truths. In the interval, we have found nothing new, except – as we have tried in turn all possible ways out of the dilemma – so many additional proofs of the conclusion that we would have liked to avoid. (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 411)

The element of intellectual biography here deserves to be taken seriously. From daydream we have passed to confession of what, in scientific practice, constitutes the true process of understanding: not the legislation of phenomena, but the effort to void oneself of meaning, such as it is given to the human subject, and to attempt its reconstruction on a superior plane. In *The Savage Mind* Lévi-Strauss would designate this ‘analytical reason’, at least if one accepts seeing it from a certain perspective, if one sees it as ‘tensed by its efforts to transcend itself’, a tension inherent in thought that leads it to risk the dissolution of man into non-man, with the goal of acquiring a superior intelligibility whose presupposed meaning blocks access to it. Inspired by Rousseau and Marx, in *The Savage Mind* this characterization aims to overcome the opposition between analytical and dialectical reason as it appears in Sartre. Which meant accepting, in his words, the labels of ‘transcendental materialist’ and ‘aesthete’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 246) for the structural anthropologist. In the final analysis, this relativizes the opposition between nature and culture, as Lévi-Strauss would warn us in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, ‘fully justifying its use [...] as a methodological tool’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1969: 1).

However, to remain a legitimate method, we must ask how this process of reduction or dissolution achieves self-control, on what fixed plane it functions. Here, the comparison with Buddhism already allows us to answer. The process of understanding is not, in fact, infinite; it occurs through a change of plane, according to a double movement of de-totalization and re-totalization, but it does not lead to a radical skepticism on the basis of the fact that there is no final level to offer the mind a point of anchorage. To the contrary, it points toward that which Buddhism had discovered right away, and which the Western consciousness, after a long journey, is only now finally able to understand: the fact that ‘the only lasting presence’ is that *in which the distinction between meaning and the absence of meaning is dissolved*. This last phase, which retroactively validates all the preceding efforts, defines a sort of modern wisdom. And this wisdom cannot be anything other than a philosophy of structures. Only the revelation of structures – if one simultaneously keeps in mind the logic which presides over their discovery and the plane of reality to which they belong, and does not separate the method that reveals them and the way of being that characterizes them – can give the sense of achieving ‘the only lasting presence’. And so, with the aim of illustrating this type

of modern intellectual experience, Lévi-Strauss does not turn his attention toward structuralism, but toward Marxism. Marxism is our modern Buddhism – the analogue of Buddhist wisdom for those who, following the path of the social sciences, have gradually dispelled all back-worlds, and have managed to rid themselves of the illusion of meaning as given to man that imposes itself on the world through him.

The complete denial of meaning is the end point in a succession of stages each one of which leads from a lesser to a greater meaning. The final step, which cannot be achieved without the others, validates them all retroactively. In its own way and on its own level, each one corresponds to a truth. Between the Marxist critique, which frees man from his initial bondage – by teaching him that the apparent meaning of his condition evaporates as soon as he agrees to see things in a wider context – and the Buddhist critique which completes his liberation, there is neither opposition nor contradiction. Each is doing the same thing as the other, but on a different level. The transition from one extreme to the other is guaranteed by all the advances in knowledge that man has accomplished in the last two thousand years, thanks to an unbroken movement of thought going from East to West, and then from West to East – perhaps for no other reason than to confirm its origin. (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 412)

If the end was given at the beginning, this means that Marxism, seen here from the perspective of a critique of ideology, began a process of liberation that was concluded in advance far earlier, by what we might call, playing upon the nature of the extremes, the ‘Buddhist critique’. The chronology thus displays a great distortion; this does not mean that Buddhism was the ancestor of Marxism, but rather that with Marxism we find ourselves at the beginning of a movement which Buddhism, in a sort of atemporality, brought to its ultimate conclusion. And, thanks to Marxism, the West would, against all expectations, have found another way to the East (that is, the East of the East), but it would have done so only by giving *its* history and the realization of thought in history – the *German Ideology* having completely upended the terms of what, in this regard, is meant by realization – a completely different shape than that in which history is presented as the revelation of meaning. Historical materialism here is understood, as in the fight he would pick with Sartre in the coming years, as a process of dissolution of meaning given to man in his being situated, through progressive widening and integration, within the natural and historical totality that surrounds him. Though here we must take him at his word, *contra* all readings that would still endow this history with a touch of ideality, that it is truly a question of *materialism*.

Still, historical materialism remains a modern intellectual construct, a later product of Western thought. If approached in this way, with the help of a model from several millennia ago, it seems absurd to simplify it so. One must, then, specify the aim of the comparison: in the ethnologist’s eyes, Marxism reveals its deeper inspiration, being related to Buddhism, from an angle that captures significant distinctions – discontinuities which help outline every properly constructed comparison. Once again, the same method is applied: Within Buddhism, Lévi-Strauss highlights an internal discontinuity, the great schism related to the problem of salvation which gave birth to Mahāyāna Buddhism. To the fundamental question, ‘Does the salvation of one depend upon the salvation of all?’, the believers in the ‘Great Vehicle’ responded in the affirmative, holding that the sage cannot extricate himself from the cycle of reincarnation if he is concerned only with his own personal Nirvana. At the center of the schism, then, lies an emphasis on the sage’s choice, which is decisive for his commitment to the world. Now, if we move to the other end of the comparison, a point becomes clear. The man of modern society is obliged to make a similar choice, but this choice also admits a mediatory term that confers a completely different tone: ‘[I]njustice, poverty, and suffering exist’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 412), it is undeniable, and this fact is inseparable from the existence of the particular type of society to which we belong, at least if we understand societies

according to the specific dynamics of their constitution. We find ourselves, then, unavoidably faced with the reproduction and accentuation of an internal distinction between the dominant and the dominated, exploiters and exploited, which results in an entropy that, paradoxically, works as a genuine functional principle. It is undeniable that injustice, considered from this structural level, gives the choice between retreat into personal virtue and commitment toward humanity a very different configuration than that which it has for the disciple of Buddha: 'We are not alone, and it does not depend on us whether we remain deaf and blind to mankind, or believe exclusively in the humanity within ourselves.' Thus, the 'practice of egotistical virtue' is precisely the egoism that we choose, since it is impossible to remain blind (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 412).

The constraint that weighs on this choice, in the event, is not of a moral order. Because it begins from one fact: the differentiated society – that which Lévi-Strauss elsewhere calls hot societies, meaning those societies that function based on an internalized difference in temperature that they must constantly maintain, like a steam engine – produce a disorder that is all their own. Dissolving the meaning lived by its actors, in a society of this type, means drawing out the structure of opposition, which, while revealing to them a more complete meaning than that which they can perceive from their own position, does not produce an image of a sensible world that they might subsequently re-internalize, either in theory or in practice. What the analysis reveals, instead, is a displacement from lived contradictions to conceptual contradictions, the latter having greater meaning than the former without, however, ceasing to be contradictions. And that which is considered to be *meaning*, on this level, occurs only in the space through which one passes from dissolved meaning to reconstructed meaning, a process that in no case concludes with the resumption through itself of historical consciousness, a movement completed in interiority.

To the contrary, this historical consciousness, which Sartre tried to reach as a subjective pole whose secret would have been placed by Marx in the class of the exploited acquiring consciousness of their situation, or later in the self-consciousness of the productive forces faced with the relations of production, is for Lévi-Strauss part of the functioning of these 'hot societies'. This is a dimension of social existence that needs to be integrated into the explanatory framework: because if hot societies forge something that deserves to be called history, and if they elevate it to the state of consciousness that they have of themselves, it is precisely because they move according to the structural differentiations in which men stand in opposition to one another, lived meaning never being recuperable as such, but only through distention joined with the absence of meaning like the other side of a coin.

The distorted reflection, then, teaches another lesson. Marxism, in relation to Buddhism, is very distinct from it, in the degree to which the experience betraying the poverty of man is presented as a *social poverty*, allowing man to see that the society which produces it is structured in such a way that it must continue to produce it to continue to exist historically; that is, to continue to exist in a *historical regime*. A regime that we might also define as entropic. Saying this does not mean displaying disgust at poverty (even if this is not absolutely forbidden nor frowned upon in principle); but it does mean considering it an ineluctable deposit of societies that have gone forward, and continue to go forward, by setting men in conflict with one another.

Should we, then, accuse Lévi-Strauss of radical pessimism, suspect him of eliminating or suffocating in utero any social critique? In a word, what else can one do to support an apparently disillusioned diagnosis, if not 'reduce Billancourt to desperation'? This objection was already being formulated in these terms in the 1950s, and Lévi-Strauss, depicting the journalistic flavor of the discussion, not only declined to respond, but he did so at the same time as he developed his analysis in the postface to Chapter XV of *Structural Anthropology*. We might recall one of his critics, Maxime Rodinson, who had cited the following passage from the conclusion of *Tristes Tropiques* in this regard:

No society is perfect. It is in the nature of all societies to include a degree of impurity incompatible with the norms they proclaim and which finds concrete expression in a certain dosage of injustice, insensitiveness and cruelty. If it is asked how this dosage is to be evaluated, anthropological research can supply an answer. While it is true that comparison between a small number of societies makes them appear very different from each other, the differences diminish as the field of investigation widens. We then discover that no society is fundamentally good, but that none is absolutely bad; they all offer their members certain advantages, with the proviso that there is invariably a residue of evil, the amount of which seems to remain more or less constant and perhaps corresponds to a specific inertia in social life resistant to all attempts at organization. (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 386–387)

Commenting himself a few years later – *Structural Anthropology* was published in 1958 – Lévi-Strauss emphasized that this passage aimed to call into question the ethnographic gaze, which sought from the outside to make comparisons between two foreign societies and weigh them in terms of a scale of justice. This was, then, something that might be considered the structural analogy of the Weberian argument on the axiomatic neutrality of the social sciences, with the decisive difference that it said nothing about the conditions of a look inwards. In Lévi-Strauss, the problem was posited in a fundamentally different way, since it took shape through the anthropologist's experience, which must necessarily encompass both sides, that of the voyage and that of the return. As we said at the outset, the anthropologist is one who looks not only at the society where he is going, but also the *societies* that he describes, comparing them to one another and drawing out on this plane external discontinuities – by which we mean the discontinuities that appear among other societies, external to his own. As for the anthropologist's own society, to which he must return in order to be a true anthropologist, he can only view it from a certain relationship of interiority, even if this relationship were heavily influenced by the discontinuities of the comparative experience. One must not under any circumstances flatten out the complexity of such an experience along the whole arc that it describes. This is not so much the dialectic of oneself and the other, as the reduplication of two types of relations: a rapport with others, united among themselves by a gaze that belongs to no one, accompanied by a rapport with oneself that employs objective discontinuities in which one does not recognize oneself, to achieve a certain modality of presence with the self once the return has taken place. In order to more closely describe the second phase, Lévi-Strauss turned to Rousseau. But one might claim that he could just as well have turned to Marx. 'Natural man did not precede society, nor is he outside it'; rather, his form is 'immanent in the social state' that defines the only conceivable human condition (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 392). Through this form and its modelling, it becomes possible to experience oneself. The form is only revealed, however, in the discontinuities that can be analyzed between different concrete societies. So the tool that can represent this exists outside ourselves, in contact with others – plural – and in the relationships that exist among them.

What use is this formal tool? The answer is clear: to free ourselves from ourselves; to commit ourselves, that is – and here the equivalence is obvious – to our society, and to its transformation:

Other societies are perhaps no better than our own; even if we are inclined to believe they are, we have no method at our disposal for proving it. However, by getting to know them better, we are enabled to detach ourselves from our own society. Not that our own society is peculiarly or absolutely bad. But it is the only one from which we have a duty to free ourselves: we are, by definition, free in relation to the others. We thus put ourselves in a position to embark on the second stage, which consists in using all societies – without adopting features from any one of them – to elucidate principles of social life that we can apply in reforming our own customs and not those of foreign societies: through the operation of a prerogative which is the reverse of the one just mentioned, the society we belong to is the only society we are in a position to transform without any risk of destroying it, since the changes, being introduced by us, are coming from within the society itself. (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 392)

Committing ourselves to social transformation means giving up strict adherence to what we are. However it is not from a moral point of view that this detachment is necessary, as if we were suddenly in possession of a superior meaning that our society would be guilty for not having already achieved. If it is true that taking part in social transformation means above all taking up the appropriate means to dissolve meaning as it is subjectively given to actors in history, the problem is not so much that of knowing whether we must morally free ourselves from the current social state, as that of conceiving the way in which we are caught up in its development, carried along by its internal dynamics, and by the possibilities that are given to us not to leave it, but to live it in a different way. Even here, we do not have a choice: it does not depend on us opening our eyes to real iniquity. But it does depend on us – and here lies the truly structural choice that allowed Lévi-Strauss to isolate the comparison between Marxism and Buddhism – to reconstruct it on a plane of intelligibility that we can get a grip on, in such a way that the driving contradiction is no longer seen as a fact external to us, to which we can only submit and obey, but as something that we fundamentally create, to the degree that our societies develop in the way they do. This is the grip offered by anthropology, as seen in its phase of return. Our society, we then learn, is ‘the only one from which we have a duty to free ourselves’. What is the meaning of the imperative here? Above all, it is that of contrast: with respect to other societies, we are *already* free naturally. In our own, on the other hand, we are naturally integrated. And we must overcome this natural state of integration, introducing a bit of play into this body – no longer allowing ourselves to be reduced to mere fuel to feed the machine – in order to clarify the principles that can truly change its direction, as part of the human assemblage of which we ourselves are a part. And it is exactly at this point that duty insinuates itself: our society is the only one from which *we have the duty* to free ourselves since, always acting from within it, it is also the only one in which we can introduce change without putting it at risk of extinction. In this case, we act from within the machine, we are immersed in its movements, intimately aware of its internal contradictions, in both its current state and its future form. The changes that we introduce are changes that have their own impetus in the movement itself. As changes, they are forms of the same social life to which they are applied. In other words, transformation, however radical as it might be, is never immanent.

Let us return, in conclusion, to Rodinson’s critique. In his view, the structural perspective would deny all progress. In fact, the question must be posed differently. Structuralism challenges the universal usage of the category of progress, which above all presupposes a break with the philosophies of history that are its foundation. For Lévi-Strauss, it is a radical misinterpretation, with respect to Marxism, to reduce it to the presupposition of continual development of historical meaning through the deepening of self-consciousness in so-called modern societies. The fact is that Marxism, as a speculative entity, is not related to the philosophy of history, but rather to anthropology. The comparison with Buddhism, as curious as it might seem, ultimately had no other purpose but to support this idea: in Western thought, Marxism and anthropology are linked internally; they mutually reinforce each other, and plow the same furrow.

Marxism is related to anthropology, or at least is eminently compatible with it, since it seeks to construct within the very heart of Western society a dynamic of transformation that is not indexed to the self-consciousness of one of its parts. The critique could be called materialistic to the degree in which it manages to satisfy that condition. And if it is opportune in this regard to speak of *historical* materialism, it is by giving the word history a completely different meaning from that of a humanity that has acquired self-consciousness, imposing the idealities revealed to this consciousness on a material, human world seen as its pure reflection. To the contrary, it is by fully accepting the materialist thesis that the new idea of progress becomes clear – an idea that Lévi-Strauss, like Marx, concerned himself with defending, without claiming to extract it from the particular societies in which it had fundamentally taken shape. This idea would refuse the metaphysical resources

of a trajectory oriented toward a beyond, the final station destined retrospectively to give meaning to the whole of the movement aimed toward it. Progress is a Western category – and there is nothing denigratory in recognizing this. But what anthropological *déplacement* uncovers, through comparison, is the dynamic that this category conceals. That dynamic reveals that the contradiction inherent in hot societies is a particular mechanism upon which the people of these societies *can act*, once they have managed to analyze its characteristics. To achieve this analytic view – this analytic *logic* – Marxism has worked like no other theoretical paradigm. Because it was the first to position itself from the perspective not of meaning given to the conscience, but of things themselves as an indistinct point between meaning and the absence of meaning, or rather as the objective articulation of different levels of the structuring of modern social reality. For the anthropologist who, by vocation, understands that the only society from which one has the duty to free oneself is one's own, for one who perceives that this is also the only society in which transformative action does not inherently run the risk of destruction, it follows that Marxism is the only critical theory that one can follow without falling back into the illusion of anthropocentrism. Knowing that it would be absurd, more than two millennia later, to claim all of a sudden to have become a Buddhist.

Translated from the Italian by Richard R. Nybakken

Notes

1. It should be noted that, here, *l'esprit molaire* is translated as 'cultural steamrolling'.
2. We find another echo of this reflection on the depopulation of Europe – this time from the perspective of the reconfiguration of the cult of the dead made inevitable by such a loss – in a text that preceded *Tristes Tropiques* by a few years: 'Le Père Noël supplicié', published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1952.

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