


The 'Unconceivable Humankind' to Come: A Portrait of Lévi-Strauss as a Demographer

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When, in March 2003, Claude Lévi-Strauss received me for the first time in his office overlooking the great reading room of the Laboratory of Social Anthropology, he asked me a question for which I had no answer. This helped me realize how poorly I still understood his worldview: he inquired if I could guess what the greatest catastrophe he had witnessed in his lifetime had been. I admit that the first event that came into my mind was the Shoah, but that answer seemed too predictable. Puzzled, I waited for his answer rather than hazard a guess, as the question was obviously rhetorical. Lévi-Strauss paused a moment, then explained:

When I was born, the world's population numbered one and a half billion people. When I entered professional life, around 1930, that figure had already grown to two billion. Today it is six billion, and it will reach nine billion in a few decades, if we are to believe the forecasts of the demographers. Such growth has already caused enormous damage in the world. It has been the greatest catastrophe I have had the misfortune to witness.¹

I noticed later that Claude Lévi-Strauss had made several similar statements during his final years (Lévi-Strauss 2001, 2004: 107, 2005: 7). They continue to amaze, perhaps even to shock. A significant number of Lévi-Strauss' readers whom I questioned on this matter confessed their own inability to understand his position, which, in their eyes, constituted a sort of aberration. Some supposed that he was expressing the pessimism and disillusionment that inevitably comes with the burdens of old age; others saw it as a subjective and visceral prejudice that belies rational comprehension. All agreed that these were very personal ideas, not worth the professional attention of the anthropologist or historian.

In reality, as I intend to demonstrate, nothing could be further from the truth. First, Lévi-Strauss' interest in the problem of population expansion emerged very early. Secondly, his views on overpopulation were supported from the beginning by a solid grounding in the relevant scholarship. Thirdly, far from being an idiosyncratic extravagance, his views matched concerns shared widely in the 1950s and 1960s: in fact, they were of primary interest to the international organizations in which Lévi-Strauss played a major role as the General Secretary of the International Social Science Council.

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It is necessary to grasp these three points if we are to comprehend the cosmological outlook underlying Lévi-Strauss' entire *oeuvre*. The principles of Lévi-Straussian cosmology cannot be reduced to the axioms of structuralist theory, nor to the philosophical presuppositions of structuralism. Their comprehension is nevertheless indispensable if we are to interpret properly the moral challenges to humanity that Lévi-Strauss never ceased to engage, raising questions about the extreme dangers that it would have to face in the not-too-distant future (Stoczkowski, 2008).

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Beginning with the publication in 1798 of Thomas Robert Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population* the problem of population growth – and its relationship to issues of production, resources, progress, prosperity, good and evil – have constituted a recurring theme in Western thought. The debate about the effects of demographic growth continued throughout the nineteenth century and intensified in the interwar period, an era that witnessed the first efforts to develop an international demographic policy and the institutionalization of demography as a science.

In this institutionalization, the advocates of birth control played a significant role. They inspired the inaugural International Congress on Population, organized in Geneva at great expense by the American Margaret Sanger, one of the leaders of the birth control movement (Buquet, 1956: 49). The notion of optimum population, first proposed in 1910 by the Swede Knut Wicksell and destined for a long life, prompted impassioned debate. Important national interests were at stake, defined as a function of demographic representations which were marked by a growing anxiety. The United States feared both a strong increase in European emigration, and also the consequences of Japanese overpopulation. The British fretted with obvious discomfort over the future of their domination of India, where the native population continued to increase rapidly. The concept of optimum population became critical in these debates. It aimed to define a level of population that would guarantee a given country a satisfactory or even maximal quality of life and well-being.² At the second International Congress on Population, held in London in 1931, the problem of optimum population was once again at the center of discussion. Deviations from the ideal equilibrium – which no one, it must be said, managed to define – alarmed both scientists and politicians. The traditional menace of under-population was joined by the danger, deemed to be even greater, of over-population (Bunle and Lévy, 1954). In France, the Popular Front continued to worry about the country's declining birth rate, presented as a harbinger of national demographic collapse (Soriot, 2002). Adolf Hitler, in contrast, envisioned over-population in Germany and dreamed of *Lebensraum*; this required a state capable of ensuring a 'natural relationship' between the growing Aryan population and the territory needed to provide the Aryans with the freedom that only sufficient living space could guarantee (Hitler, 1992 [1925/26]: 587).

These debates resumed after the Second World War, but in a palpably different context. On the one hand, the concept of optimum population was used to estimate the demographic consequences of the loss of life brought on by of the war in Europe (Letinier, 1946). On the other, it was of critical importance in the growing debates over the imbalance between alimentary resources and the extremely rapid growth of the populations of the so-called underdeveloped nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In 1944, Frank W. Notestein (1902–1983), director of the Office of Population Research, which had conducted demographic studies for the League of Nations, claimed that unrestrained population growth in the colonized nations could carry a great risk for the colonial empires, threatened in the long run by the possibility that their populations might become minorities in their own countries and thus lose control of world resources (Notestein, 1944). It seemed obvious that overpopulation represented a real peril. For example, in 1943, following a conjunction of various factors – climactic, economic, political, and demographic – Bengal, then under British

domination, was ravaged by a terrible famine. It is estimated that between 1943 and 1946 this famine and the epidemics that ensued killed somewhere between one and a half and three million people (Greenough, 1982).

This tragedy influenced public opinion and revived old concerns about 'Asiatic over-population'. The fears were all the greater since the long process of decolonization had already begun in Asia: the Philippines obtained independence in 1946, India and Pakistan in 1947, Indonesia in 1949. These were countries whose overpopulation had been the subject of demographers' warnings for decades. Interest in India remained high as the British administration possessed precise demographic statistics that showed a clear trend of strong population growth beginning in the 1920s, a result of the introduction of new agricultural techniques, the fight against epidemics, and the development of a transportation network which allowed better redistribution of resources among the provinces (Davis, 1951). The publication of the Indian Census for 1951 provoked a particularly strong reaction, as it demonstrated that, after a third consecutive decade of vigorous growth of the order of 14%, the country's population had reached some 362 million (Caldwell and Caldwell, 1986: 21). Prompted by the media, demographers were inclined to adopt an increasingly apocalyptic tone. In Malthusian language, they expressed fears that the food supply would not be able to keep pace with such a continued increase in the population, and that the resulting imbalance would lead to a catastrophe on a global scale. In 1953, the eminent American sociologist and demographer Kingsley Davis wrote that 'one of the worst afflictions of modern times [is] the aimless and economically deleterious multiplication of human numbers' (Davis, 1954: 66).

The common solution was to introduce strict controls over the birth rate in the Third World countries. A minority of demographers remained skeptical, denouncing what they saw as a Western psychosis. Not surprisingly, they found their primary ally in Soviet propaganda, which saw Malthusianism as a tool of capitalism, incapable of finding any other solution to problems of unemployment and malnutrition, which were presumed to be consubstantial with the market economy. In 1949 the French demographer Alfred Sauvy – who, in the interwar years, had published several refined and occasionally critical papers on the concept of optimum population – remarked ironically that it was 'very unpleasant to see the White Man, European (or of European origin), sowing the seed of sterility in populations whose domination was now slipping from his grasp' (Sauvy, 1949: 453). Although not completely wrong, this judgment was nevertheless excessive, since the prospect of an explosive growth of prolific populations was worrying not only the old colonial powers, but also the new rulers of those countries which had recently won their independence. After the publication of the alarming results of the 1951 Indian Census, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru declared: 'We produce more and more food, but we also produce more and more children. I wish we produced fewer children' (Caldwell and Caldwell, 1986: 48). Consequently, the Indian government launched a birth control program in 1952.

Nevertheless, the dramatization of demographic discourse in the decade 1945–1955 was due less to the publication of new statistical data than to dark predictions about the future, which were themselves beginning to multiply at a prodigious pace. In 1944, Kingsley Davis warned that the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) would, if it followed the European model of demographic growth, reach some 750 million inhabitants by 2024. This prediction was considered extremely alarming. In fact, it greatly underestimated the future reality (by 1975, India alone had some 750 million people), yet it was sufficient to stimulate a panic that influenced the policies of several international organizations, which had become the providers of censuses and demographic forecasts whose outlook was usually far from reassuring (Caldwell and Caldwell, 1986: 21–22).³

In 1946, the United Nations established the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), including a Population Division, directed by the Population Commission (now the Commission on Population and Development), and the Office of Statistics, directed by the Statistical Commission.⁴ In 1947 the

Office of Statistics started publishing global population data in its *Demographic Yearbook*; at the end of the 1940s the UN Department of Social Affairs began to release estimates of trends in global demographic growth which indicated strong rates of growth in Africa (18.6%) and Latin America (21.4%) (Caldwell and Caldwell, 1986: 22–23). In 1951 the Population Division published its first *Bulletin* which included three rough estimates of global population by the year 1980: the lowest figure predicted 2 billion and 976 million, the highest 3 billion and 636 million – which seemed enormous at the time, although they were ultimately far below the actual figure of 4 billion and 515 million in 1980. Even if these demographic conjectures, systematically underestimating the decline in mortality rates in the Third World countries, were unable to forecast accurately global population growth, they nevertheless offered figures high enough to perpetuate and amplify an atmosphere of alarm. This concern was expressed openly in the publications of the Population Division, the most influential being *The Determinants and Consequences of Population Trends: A Summary of the Findings of Studies on the Relationships between Population Changes and Economic and Social Conditions*, released in 1953. The same anxiety was found in the publications of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP), the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Bank, the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the World Health Organization (WHO) (Caldwell and Caldwell, 1986: 28). Not to be left out, in November 1947 the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) organized a conference in Paris, with the assistance of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, to study ‘the influence of demographic phenomena on international relations’ (Bunle and Lévy, 1954: 23).

We should keep this historical context in mind if we are to understand the climate of opinion in the West when Claude Lévi-Strauss, invited by UNESCO, took a long journey through Pakistan and India. Alfred Métraux, his old friend and a permanent member of UNESCO’s Department of Social Science, assigned him the mission of investigating the ‘state of the social sciences in Pakistan’, a task that could hardly be described as arduous, given the near non-existence of the social sciences in Pakistan at the time.⁵ Nevertheless, the journey lasted a few months, from 3 August until 23 October 1950, taking Lévi-Strauss from Karachi, Peshawar, and Lahore, in western Pakistan, through Calcutta, Delhi, and Agra, in India, to Dacca, Chittagong, and Rangamati in eastern Pakistan (Lévi-Strauss, 1951b, 1952, 1992: 144–145). The suffocating images of human poverty and overcrowding that Lévi-Strauss described, and of which *Tristes Tropiques* stands as poignant testimony, are indelible. For him, those ‘overpopulated tropics’, in contrast to the ‘empty’ tropics of the Americas, represented ‘filth, chaos, promiscuity, congestion; ruins, huts, mud, dirt; dung, urine, pus, humours, secretions, oozing’. He described cities teeming with cattle, vultures, and scrawny people, their gait grotesque, a sort of *danse macabre* in which he perceived an obsession with hunger and ‘the clinical symptoms of agony’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 134–135, 144; translation rectified by W. Stoczkowski). He had the impression that this very density of humans caused a drastic alteration in interpersonal relations and compelled the individual to deny others their fundamental humanity, which they otherwise so dearly wished they could acknowledge (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 136). In those regions where the density sometimes exceeded one thousand people per square kilometer, Lévi-Strauss believed discover a society that – in a metaphor he would re-deploy much later in *Race and Culture* – is ‘poisoned by its own density, like those flour parasites which manage to kill each other at a distance by their toxins, even before their food supply runs out’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 148). While inventing a system of binary oppositions, in which India at times represented the antithesis of America’s native past, at others the homologue of Europe’s future, Lévi-Strauss neglected to mention in *Tristes Tropiques* that he traveled through these profoundly unsettled countries at a very particular moment, when they had just paid for their independence with immense population transfers following the division of the British Indian Empire, which had thrown into exile more than fourteen million refugees; that this division was followed

by massacres and war, with additional victims and further migrations; and that one of these countries had only recently been struck by a terrible famine, in which more than one million human beings died and whose stigmata were still omnipresent.⁶

Be that as it may, a visit to the Indian sub-continent could certainly produce an effect just as troubling as the reading of statistics and demographic predictions. The narrative of such a journey rapidly became a commonplace in the discourse of those who had prepared for such a disorienting experience solely through study of the statistics. It is no coincidence that the controversial book by Paul R. Ehrlich – who, in the arsenal of potential instruments of the apocalypse, placed the P bomb (for Population) alongside the A- and H-bombs – opened with the description of a hallucinatory ride through Delhi in a dusty taxi full of fleas, wading laboriously through streets pullulating with masses of people eating, sleeping, urinating, and defecating in public, reduced by their indigence (or perhaps only by the Western gaze) to the level of mere animals, and whose poverty seemed to be their primary social characteristic (Ehrlich, 1968). Should we conclude that this type of tourist experience, which confronted the Western visitor with such extreme otherness, was sufficient to awaken fears of overpopulation? It would be hasty to suggest this in the absence of proof, particularly in the case of Lévi-Strauss, who had the practice of filtering the lessons that experience gave him through the prism of sustained reflection. However, without underestimating the impact of the tribulations through the Indian subcontinent on his worldview, we must add a new element to the story in order to understand Lévi-Strauss' interest in demography.

It is often forgotten that between 1952 and 1961 Claude Lévi-Strauss was Secretary-General of the International Social Science Council (ISSC). This organization, which enjoyed NGO status, had been created in 1952 at the behest and with the support of the Social Sciences Division of UNESCO (Platt, 2002; Rokkan, 1979). The ISSC was supposed to play an advisory role to UNESCO through defining research agendas of international interest, shared by experts from different countries, and carrying out such international projects with the goal of producing summary reports to assist UNESCO in its mission to ensure 'world peace through justice and liberty'.⁷ Biographers of Lévi-Strauss and critics of his *oeuvre* have never paid much attention to his activities as the head of the ISSC, even though he held this office for nine years.⁸ It is true that Lévi-Strauss himself was always somewhat reticent to discuss the subject. In his conversations with Didier Éribon, for instance, he limited himself to summarizing those nine years by saying that he had tried 'to give the impression that an organization without goal or function had a reason for existing' and that he had to justify the means that the Council placed at his disposal through 'a semblance of activity' (Lévi-Strauss and Éribon, 1991: 60–61).

Here, Lévi-Strauss was both ironic and harsh. One shouldn't forget that while everyone is entitled to judge their own past, such a judgment is but a representation, occasionally tinged by ambiguous or conflicting feelings, where disappointment or the simple distance afforded by time can play an important role. Thus, Lévi-Strauss' sarcasm should not be taken at face value. The archives of the International Social Science Council show that Lévi-Strauss threw himself into a rich, intense period of activity during those years, and with a very personal degree of engagement, particularly at the outset. Undoubtedly, his job assured him certain advantages to which he was not indifferent, since he was then experiencing a materially difficult period. The Council placed a secretary at his disposal, paid for his subscription to expensive anthropology periodicals, covered his expenses for the acquisition of books, and afforded him a modest monthly emolument of 80,000 (old) Francs which was the equivalent of 1,530 Euros today.⁹ However, such benefits are not sufficient to explain the direction that Lévi-Strauss gave to his work for the Council, nor the energy that he invested in it, the scale of which one can grasp through the ISSC archives. These archives are particularly useful in revealing the circumstances that triggered Lévi-Strauss' long-standing interest in demography.

In December 1951 Lévi-Strauss was invited, together with seventeen other scholars, to join a consultative committee set up following the creation of the ISSC. The committee preferred to begin with the institution's administrative organization, setting aside the equally difficult matter of its precise functions until a later date (UNESCO, 1951).¹⁰ In October 1952 the agenda of the ISSC constituent assembly was once again focused on organizational issues, with the question of its research agenda left open, although Otto Klineberg proposed subsequently to undertake an international study of the social consequences of technological change (UNESCO, 1952).¹¹ The task of defining the Council's role was, in the end, left to Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was named Secretary-General and charged with presenting the Executive Board with proposals for its research agenda at the subsequent meeting in six months' time.

On 27 February 1953, Claude Lévi-Strauss sent the members of the Executive Board a ten page typewritten memorandum, in which he outlined his vision of the work that the ISSC should promote. He proposed that the Council's agenda find 'a starting point in the work of the Commission on Population and the activities connected with the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization' (Lévi-Strauss, 1953a: 2). In his opinion:

[T]he most significant work undertaken by the United Nations, from the scientific point of view, was having elaborated and disseminated the fundamental ideas regarding the demographic structure of human societies; having attracted attention to the gravity of the tendencies evident in that field and that could be subject to truly scientific evaluation, and, finally, having contributed to the attenuation of ideological conflicts by demonstrating that they are perhaps nothing but an indirect consequence of objective phenomena, of which men do not have a clear understanding. (Lévi-Strauss, 1953a: 2)

Consequently, Lévi-Strauss recommended that the Council work to 'specify and deepen this awareness of the actual situation in which humanity currently finds itself', since this was the only way to render 'services of immense value not only from a theoretical, but also a practical, perspective' (Lévi-Strauss, 1953a: 2).

After having traced these guidelines, Lévi-Strauss identified several potential research projects, with the goal of refining demographic analyses and offering the social sciences an invaluable opportunity for international collaboration. First, Lévi-Strauss proposed that economics, law, sociology, social anthropology, and psychology should be brought together to analyze issues of overpopulation. Such issues concerned not only the field of demography, but also psychology, communications, and societies' representations of their own demography, since each society reacts differently to the same numerical phenomena because of the subjective outlook its members have of the objective population density. This recommendation was probably inspired by the then-recent book by the demographer Alfred Sauvy, who represented France on the UN Population Commission, and who was cited by Lévi-Strauss in his memorandum (Lévi-Strauss, 1953a: 3; Sauvy, 1952).

Secondly, the Council was encouraged to support multidisciplinary research on the widening dimensions of national groupings. Faced with the emergence of composite 'super-states' such as the Soviet Union, India, or China, Lévi-Strauss suggested that the Council should encourage research on the political, legal, economic, and social consequences that such a change of scale entailed, with the possibility of defining the optimal size of national groupings, a problem that had once fascinated Auguste Comte. Lévi-Strauss hoped that the results of such research 'would help statesmen, especially in Europe, foresee the consequences of their efforts toward federation or unification' (Lévi-Strauss, 1953a: 4). In his opinion, the European unification movement relied on the conviction that 'super-states' represented a normal type of structure for the modern world; the studies undertaken by the ISSC would be able to call into question this arbitrary and potentially harmful certitude.

The third proposed axis of research concerned the consequences of the fight against illiteracy as understood from the point of view of communication between individuals and groups. For Lévi-Strauss, UNESCO's activities in this area were only accelerating a universal trend which seemed to him to be inevitable. And yet, he argued, it was not always obvious that the transformations at work in traditional societies as a result of increasing literacy could sometimes be of an 'extreme gravity, which would be important to foresee and remedy in some cases' (Lévi-Strauss, 1953a: 5). In reality, literacy led to a dizzying growth of information which, by the mere fact of its abundance, became difficult to access, to the point that individuals could more easily be deceived and manipulated, since only rarely did they possess the necessary competence to sort through this new abundance appropriately. As a result, the social bond, founded on communication, was altered and entire populations could find themselves subjugated to those individuals who were capable of controlling and manipulating information. Lévi-Strauss exhorted the social sciences to seek to understand why 'oral information used by small groups without writing (as in primitive societies) is better suited to maintaining equilibrium and group cohesion, which is frequently not the case with written information in contemporary societies' (Lévi-Strauss, 1953a: 5–6).

This summary of Lévi-Strauss' memorandum to the Executive Board of the ISSC is sufficient to get a sense of the extremely provocative and non-conformist character of his proposals. Addressing the heads of a body created and financed by UNESCO, Lévi-Strauss deliberately went against the grain of the principal axioms of the Organization's mission. While UNESCO stated that the primary problem it had to address was that of prejudice and ignorance, Lévi-Strauss declared that international organizations would do better to look toward demographic questions, among them overpopulation, since the ideological conflicts that pitted states against one another and threatened peace were fuelled by much deeper, unconscious forces shaping human populations. Even if Lévi-Strauss did not fully explore all the consequences of this main idea, or at least not as explicitly as he would do twenty years later in *Race and Culture*, it is undeniable that the same difference of opinion separated him and UNESCO in 1953: he did not make the same diagnosis as UNESCO regarding the root cause of the evils that threatened humanity. For him, this could be found not in the realm of ideas, but in that of demography. Henceforth he would not waver on this essential point. If, in that same memorandum, Lévi-Strauss spoke about ideas, it was because the reaction of human societies to their demographic saturation seemed to him to be mediated by the subjective representation of overpopulation that each society formulates. The study of the articulation between objective and subjective phenomena, between what is unconsciously ignored and what is knowingly admitted, would help to measure the dangers to which humanity was exposed in neglecting the demographic threat.

But that was not enough. Lévi-Strauss hoped that states and their leaders would also understand the phenomena concomitant, or consequent, to demographic and political evolution. For him, the desire to create supranational political structures on a vast scale, an aspiration periodically reborn after the great wars, failed to take into account the structural limitations of human groupings, ignorance of which could lead to the destruction of the social bond. With this argument, Lévi-Strauss clearly decided to contradict the official ideology of the UN and UNESCO, which took supranational unification to be a healthy and desirable process. Lévi-Strauss appeared equally provocative when he spoke of literacy, one of UNESCO's primary battle horses. The Organization saw literacy as a primary prerequisite for its 'revolutionary tasks', which consisted of the enactment of a global program of fundamental education whose realization, by making 'new ideas' – those of UNESCO, naturally – 'public property', would foster the overcoming of national divisions and, in the long run, create a 'new human unity'.¹² Lévi-Strauss pointed out the other side of the coin, questioning the idea that access to more abundant information thanks to literacy would always have positive consequences.

It was then 1953. Barely two and a half years had passed since his return from Asia, but Lévi-Strauss had already had time to improve his knowledge of demography. It is true that in his 1953 memorandum the only explicit reference made was to Alfred Sauvy; numerous other allusions, however, indicate that he knew the works on demography which had captured the attention of international organizations. It's difficult to know today if it was his journey to the Indian subcontinent which gave birth to Lévi-Strauss' interest in demography or if, to the contrary, his interest preceded it and influenced the traveler's gaze. One thing is certain: his distancing from UNESCO had its origins quite early on. Paradoxically, it was the very work that the Organization had entrusted to him, such as his mission in Pakistan or the setting up of the ISSC program, which contributed the most to setting the stage for his break with UNESCO.

Claude Lévi-Strauss' report was accepted at the meeting of the ISSC Executive Board in April 1953. Its initial title was *The Influence of the Change of Scale on the Properties of Social Groups and on the Nature of Social Groups*, though this new formulation did not change its content. It was important, not only from a theoretical but also from a practical point of view, for its comments on the programs of the European Federation and the policy recommendations with respect to the so-called 'under-developed countries'.¹³ In December 1953, at the ISSC General Assembly, Lévi-Strauss made a more detailed presentation on his demographic program, which retained the outlines of his February memorandum. The new text was edited with the help of Georges Th. Guillaud, a mathematician from the *Institut de Science Économique Appliquée*, who in 1956 would be admitted to the sixth section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, where he would work alongside Lévi-Strauss for many years.

In this new document, Lévi-Strauss specified that the phenomenon that particularly interested him was that of the 'demographic explosions' typical of underdeveloped countries which had recently experienced an improvement in standards of living, the introduction of vaccinations, and the widespread use of insecticides. Lévi-Strauss' interest was clearly normative: he wanted to define a 'critical dimension' for human populations, analogous to the critical dimension that biologists had identified in living beings. Some biologists observed, for example, that the anatomical structure of an insect did not allow it to grow beyond a certain size because it was built in such a way that the surface area for evaporation had to grow more rapidly than its volume; or, again, when they concluded that the weight of mammals was limited by the structural properties of the mass that could be supported on the pillars of the legs. Lévi-Strauss believed that similar limits could be discovered for human societies, saying that '[a]t first glance it seems fairly probable that the number of individuals cannot multiply with impunity by ten, one hundred, or one thousand in a collectivity of a given structure' (Lévi-Strauss, 1953b). This was an explicit suggestion of the dangers of excessive growth in the size of societies.

Two new ideas emerged from this text. First, Lévi-Strauss hoped that the Council would help the social sciences achieve greater scientific precision, which would require a more standardized use of mathematical methods. To this end, he asked that a seminar on the 'Use of Mathematics in the Social Sciences', which he had organized for the beginning of 1953 at the *Maison de l'UNESCO* with the financial support of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, be under the auspices of the ISSC (Lévi-Strauss, 1953c). Secondly, he proposed organizing a training course in demography. After a lengthy phase of preliminary preparations, the training course was to be held in Paris in the summer of 1955. This date was not chosen by chance. Lévi-Strauss informed the Council Assembly that in September 1954 the United Nations was to hold a World Population Conference, at which the UN Population Division intended to release its report on *The Determining Factors of Population Growth and its Consequences*. Lévi-Strauss hoped that, using this report, the ISSC could engage in some reflection on the gaps in demographic knowledge and the research to be undertaken in that field. Beforehand, he intended to organize two meetings of demographic

experts, one in Europe, under the auspices of the ISSC, and the other in the United States, with the financial assistance of the Social Science Research Council there. The latter was to be under the direction of Frank W. Notestein, who, from 1946 to 1948, had been the first Director-General of the Population Division at the UN.¹⁴ These preparations would lead up to the Parisian summer school, the objectives of which would be three-fold: to alert public opinion in the ‘insufficiently developed’ countries regarding the gravity of the demographic threat; to train experts from those countries; and, finally, to entrust these experts with regional demographic studies back in their respective home countries (Lévi-Strauss, 1953d).

The two seminars envisaged by Lévi-Strauss were organized quickly: the first, held in New York from 20–22 December 1953, brought together Frank W. Notestein (Princeton University), Edward A. Ackerman (Tennessee Valley Authority), John Gordon (Harvard University), Simon Kuznets (University of Pennsylvania), Wilbert Moore (Princeton University), and Paul Webink (Social Science Research Council); the second, in Paris from 22–24 February 1954, had the participation of Jacques Doublet (director of the French National Health Service [*Sécurité Sociale*]), David V. Glass (London School of Economics), Sjoerd Groenman (University of Utrecht), J. Mertens de Wilmars (University of Louvain), Alfred Sauvy (INED), Frank W. Notestein, and Claude Lévi-Strauss – as well as Alva Myrdal, Otto Klineberg, H.M. Phillips, and L. Diaz-Gonzales, all acting as observers for UNESCO. The goal of the two meetings was to identify the primary gaps in current demographic knowledge and to bring them to the attention of the UN Commission for Population in a report to be written by Frank W. Notestein. The report on *The Determining Factors in Population Growth and its Consequences*, which would be made public at the forthcoming World Population Conference, constituted the basis for the discussions of the two groups. The results of the two seminars were given in a fifteen-page memorandum which presented fifty proposals for studies to be undertaken and for data useful to gather in order to understand the relationships among demographic, economic, and social factors, with particular emphasis on the ‘insufficiently developed’ countries.¹⁵ The memorandum was then submitted to the World Population Conference, held in Rome from 31 August until 10 September 1954. At its meeting issues of population growth were discussed in depth, their understanding being deemed essential to the survival of the human race (BB, PRC, and FAAM, 1955).

Lévi-Strauss’ idea to organize a demographic training course also came to fruition, although it was finally held not in Paris but in Bandung, Indonesia, thanks to the cooperation of the ISSC with the UN Department of Social Affairs and the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East. The lectures delivered between 21 November and 3 December 1955 were addressed primarily to the scholars, administrators, and politicians gathered there (from Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam). The goal was to inform participants of the economic and social consequences of population growth and thus make them sensitive to the need for accurate statistical data gathered from the field, on the one hand, and to the need to adopt feasible policies regarding control of the birth rate, migration, and economic development, on the other.¹⁶

In subsequent years the activities of the ISSC became more diversified, and demographic issues, although always present, would not enjoy the prominent place for which Lévi-Strauss had hoped. Nevertheless, this first initiative left a mark on the ISSC’s program, and made the Council an important partner in debates on the demographic future of the planet, debates that concerned international organizations throughout the period. For Lévi-Strauss, it was an opportunity to weave together a network of contacts with various demographers and to deepen his understanding of their work.

It is clear that Lévi-Strauss’ interest in demography and his opinions on overpopulation were not simply matters of personal extravagance: they were part of a vast movement of ideas and concerns of the era shared internationally by a great number of scholars, political figures, journalists, and philanthropists. In the United States, for instance, several private foundations considered support

for demographic research in general, and studies of overpopulation in particular, to be of primary importance. Beginning in 1952, the ISSC, though financed in large part by UNESCO, also received part of its budget from the Ford Foundation (established by the son of the founder of the Ford Motor Company). After 1951 the Foundation was directed by Paul Hoffman, former administrator of the Marshall Plan, who emphasized among its many priorities development aid for Southern Asia and the Middle East. This led it, by the end of the 1950s, to begin a program of subventions for research into demography and birth control policies.¹⁷

Thus, Lévi-Strauss' diagnosis – in this particular historical context – regarding the effects of demographic growth should not be considered as an idiosyncratic idea, but rather as an elaborate theory that must be understood within the much broader conceptual system that Lévi-Strauss had developed during that period. In broad strokes, this system resembles what anthropologists studying societies other than their own call *cosmology*: a cluster of general axiomatic principles, concerning the form, content, and dynamics of the universe, all animate and inanimate beings, their ontological and accidental properties, the principles or forces that explains the origins as well as the future of all living creatures.

Such cosmological conceptions also exist in Western societies, and can be easily found underlying many social science theories, which are based explicitly or implicitly on axiomatic infrastructures. One of the most striking peculiarities of such Western cosmologies is the central place they give to the question of evil and to radical remedies for it.

Lévi-Strauss gave an unequivocal and categorical answer to the question of evil. It may be seen in the demographic representations that he had formulated beginning in 1951: in his opinion, the evils that oppress us have their common origin in the excessive proliferation of the human species. This was for him the common source of xenophobia, racism, and war; the root cause of a series of deleterious phenomena: the disappearance of the conditions necessary for the continued evolution of culture and living species; the destruction of the wonders that we admire in the creations of nature; the cultural conformity that annihilates humanity's creative faculties and permanently deprives us of the hope of seeing new masterpieces whose contemplation gives meaning to life; the devastation of the natural environment, which we despoil irremediably, preparing our own extinction. Caught up in a reproductive frenzy, humanity lives now only to destroy itself in an uninterrupted debasement of the splendid gifts that we once cultivated in ancient time.

If this demographic explosion is the fount of all evil in the world, that does not mean it is its primary cause: it is what philosophers call a secondary cause, the effect of another, deeper cause. According to Lévi-Strauss, the primary cause of evil was the pernicious humanism that Western culture, dominant around the world, had inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Renaissance, and Cartesian thought. It was this humanism that had created the conditions that made the demographic explosion possible:

I have the feeling that all the tragedies we have lived through – first with colonialism, then with fascism, finally with extermination camps – are not a negation of the alleged humanism we have practiced for several centuries, but are rather its natural extension. (Lévi-Strauss, 1979: 24)

What we call humanism is thus nothing but selfishness and arrogance. True humanism, he said, 'does not begin with oneself, but puts the world before life, life before man, and respect for others before self-interest' (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 508). If we have destroyed an immense number of societies, whose variety constituted the greatest part of the humanity's heritage, and if, now, multiplying to excess, we persist in exterminating countless living species, this is because this degenerate humanism has convinced us that our freedom is boundless and that our rights, including the right to

procreate, are proportional to the excessive space that we have usurped for ourselves in the system of creation.

There is no hope, then, for us or for our world, if we persist in this error. However, Lévi-Strauss believed that ethnology has a special role, which could contribute to reawakening our conscience. It studies societies that had never ‘cultivated an image of man as lord and master of creation, free to grant himself exorbitant rights over all manifestations of nature and life. Precisely the opposite: the philosophical systems of these peoples agree in giving man a privileged place in the world, but on the condition that he does not encroach upon that of other living species, and that they remain free to exist and to prosper’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 27).

Ethnology should not be content simply to collect scientific data. It also had a moral mission, because it could make us understand ‘the lessons of a wisdom which the West could imitate if it wanted to ensure that a humanity, too arrogant and prone to destroy all that is not itself, should no longer possess a protective shield to guard itself against its own attacks’. The original sin of modern man was having forgotten that ‘his essential dignity is not so much that which he attributes exclusively to himself as a thinking being, as that which he shares, as a living being, with millions of animal and vegetable species’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 28).

This diagnosis of the primary cause of evil reflected one of the founding axioms of the Lévi-Straussian cosmology. For Lévi-Strauss, the entropic regression of the universe could be counteracted by the moral progress of Western society, progress that would consist of extending bonds of moral obligations across the living world, including the natural world, which would ultimately lead him to a fully accomplished humanism (Lévi-Strauss, 1956, 1973: 28). The realization of this ideal meant restoring, on the scale of global civilization, the harmonious relationship that small societies of the ancient man had long ago created with nature.

This worldview possesses a soteriological character, insofar as it resolutely and explicitly deals with the question of evil and the means for its eventual, albeit provisional, elimination. At all levels of the reality, Lévi-Strauss discerns a conflict between two antagonistic forces: the cosmos is marked by the antinomy between entropy, which dissolves order, and negentropy, which generates it; nature is the stage for a tension between the extinction of species, which reduces the number of biological forms, and speciation, which enriches the panoply of living forms; human history illustrates the contradiction between the standardization of cultures and creativity which widens its treasure of diversity. Thus, the past, the present, and the future of the entire universe can be reduced to the conflict between the opposing forces of uniformity and diversification: evil is allied with the former, good with the latter. In this cosmological system, humanity is charged with a very special task: although it will never be able to reverse the direction of the inexorable progress of entropy, it should nevertheless be vigilant to avoid artificially accelerating the impoverishment of nature and standardization of culture. Humanity will not fulfill this mission without first satisfying an essential precondition: it must undergo a moral transformation that would lead it toward a more general humanism, indispensable for the restoration of a harmonious relationship between man and nature – this, in turn, is the reason why mastery of demographic growth is so necessary.

Lévi-Strauss’ conception of history was strongly deterministic. And yet, this determinism was not, for him, an ontological property of history, but an accidental property, the fruit of material progress realized after the invention of agriculture, animal husbandry, and, especially, after industrialization, whose consequences had led to an overpopulated world in which humanity faces nowadays unforgiving, unforeseen determining forces (Lévi-Strauss, 2013: 40). And it was in this world that Lévi-Strauss said he now found himself ‘deported’ (Lévi-Strauss, 2004: 107). He was a great wielder of the French language, and the choice of the word ‘deported’, strongly associated in France with the Shoah, eloquently summarizes his judgment on the contemporary world.

It is a world that humanity might have avoided. However, since we threw ourselves into this world – blindly and resolutely – it has become inevitable, closing itself upon us like a trap. The only way out is through the difficult route of moral discipline. Lévi-Strauss finally lost faith in humanity's ability to subject itself to that discipline. If he didn't consider the Shoah to be the greatest tragedy of his lifetime, this is because the extermination camps did not appear to him to be 'simply the result of an aberration on the part of a people, a doctrine, or a group of men', but rather like 'a premonitory sign of our moving into a finite world' born before our eyes, that is transforming the entire planet into one immense extermination camp where the 'unconceivable humanity to come' will slowly fade away (Lévi-Strauss, 1992: 149).

Translated from the Italian by Richard R. Nybakken

Notes

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, interview with the author, 25 March 2003.
2. Interested readers will find a history of the notion of optimum population in Buquet (1956: 1–66). In an incisive and well-documented study, Hervé Le Bras (1994) has analyzed the presuppositions of the various theories that drew upon the notion of optimum population.
3. According to the 2001 census, India numbered more than one billion people: <http://www.censusindia.gov.in>
4. A brief history of the UN's demographic initiatives can be found in Boserup (1979: 201–210).
5. A seven-page report summarizes the results of his investigation: Lévi-Strauss (1951c).
6. See, for example, Chatterji (2007). Though unremarked upon in *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss was fully aware of these recent events and openly wrote of them in various other articles: Lévi-Strauss (1951a, 1951c: 889).
7. Procès-verbal de la Réunion consultative relative à la création du Conseil International des Sciences Sociales, Maison de l'UNESCO, Paris, 18–22 December 1951, p. 3. Archive of the International Social Science Council, UNESCO, Paris, SS/SSI/Conf. 4/SR.-1-7.
8. In his biography of Lévi-Strauss, Denis Bertholet devotes but three brief paragraphs to this topic: Bertholet (2003: 210–211).
9. Archive of the International Social Science Council, accounting books of the ISSC, Paris. The conversion from the old French Franc to the contemporary Euro was calculated according to the tables available from the INSEE: <<http://www.insee.fr/fr/indicateur/achatfranc.htm>>.
10. Procès-verbal de la Réunion consultative relative à la création du Conseil International des Sciences Sociales, Maison de l'UNESCO, Paris, 18–22 December 1951. Archive of the International Social Science Council, UNESCO, Paris, SS/SSI/Conf. 4/SR.-1-7.
11. Rapport de l'Assemblée constitutive du Conseil International des Sciences Sociales, Maison de l'UNESCO, Paris, 6–9 Octobre 1952. Archive of the International Social Science Council, UNESCO, Paris, box 'Administration General. Documents on the Creation of ISSC', pp. 1–14.
12. These were the terms used in *Fundamental Education: Common Ground for All Peoples*. Report of a Special Committee to the Preparatory Commission of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (New York: Macmillan, 1947), see esp. Ch. V.
13. Compte rendu sommaire des travaux de la seconde session du Comité Exécutif, 7–10 April 1953, pp. 1–17. Archive of the International Social Science Council, UNESCO, Paris, box 'Administration General. Documents on the Creation of ISSC'.
14. Notestein's career was summed up by Ryder (1984).
15. Notestein FW, Gaps in Existing Knowledge of the Relationship between Population Trends and Economic and Social Problems, pp. 1–15. ISSC 54-1, E/COBF. 13/292, Meeting n. 26. The work of the Paris group was summarized in Groenman S, Le rapport sur le séminaire consacré à l'étude des problèmes démographiques, ISSC 54-1, pp. 1–4. Archive of the International Social Science Council, UNESCO, Paris, box 'ISSC Misc. (*Les lacunes des recherches. Population in Asia*)', ISSC, 8/2.2.

16. Report of the United Nations Seminar on the Population in Asia and the Near East, pp. 1–31. Archive of the International Social Science Council, UNESCO, Paris, box 'ISSC Misc. (*Les lacunes des recherches. Population in Asia*)', ISSC, 8/2.2.
17. Accounting books for the period 1952–1958, Archive of the International Social Science Council UNESCO, Paris. See also Caldwell and Caldwell (1986).

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