

Berichte und Kommentare

Reflections on Meaning and Myth

Claude Lévi-Strauss Revisited

Robert C. Philen

Claude Lévi-Strauss is most famous for his structural studies of kinship and myth, especially his "Elementary Structures of Kinship" and "Mythologies" series. As he stated in "The Raw and the Cooked" (1969b), and reiterated on occasion in later texts (see Lévi-Strauss 1979; Lévi-Strauss and Eribon 1991), Lévi-Strauss saw both of these projects – the studies of kinship and of myth – as part of a continuous project to understand the universal structure or patterning of the human mind.

Lévi-Strauss' work has often been critiqued, perhaps most vociferously by cultural materialists like Marvin Harris. Harris faulted Lévi-Strauss' kinship work for being unable to explain why particular kin systems show up where they do. He further questioned Lévi-Strauss' notion of mythic thought as "good to think" for the universally structuring mind, saying that given the plethora of mythic plot and form seen cross-culturally, this universal mind had a particularly broad palate at the least (see Harris 1979, 1987). Certainly, Harris' cultural materialism, as well as some other theoretical perspectives, may more accurately predict why particular kin structures, such as matrilineal-matrilocal complexes or avunculocality, occur in particular political or ecological settings. Lévi-Strauss' ability to reduce human kinship to a few basic structuring principles (1969a) is still significant. And the balanced positive-negative affective dimensions of Lévi-Strauss' "atom of kinship" (1963, 1976a) are not so easily dismissable – being essentially arbitrary and the product of the human mind and not reducible to culture-environment infrastructural relations (that is, though the specific relation of, say, mother's brother to sister's son in

a particular system may have an environmentally or other contextually influenced component, that the atom of kinship will always contain a balance of positive and negative affective relations is arbitrary – and the product of the structuring effects of the mind rather than any particular techno-environmental determinants). More importantly for the purposes of this article, the fact that mythic plot takes a plethora of forms in no way detracts from Lévi-Strauss' project. The search for order underlying this apparent chaos is, after all, his starting point, and his approach puts him at odds with those, such as Harris, who view myth as meaningless or epiphenomenal and derivative of adaptational or political economic context.

Lévi-Strauss' analyses of particular myths, primarily Native American myths from throughout the Americas, are ample evidence of the success of this project, for example the myth of the skate's defeat of the South Wind (1979) or the "Story of Asdiwal" (1976b) wherein the choice of particular plot elements and their sequence is analyzed in terms of their functioning as binary operators. More impressive still, and more important for this article's focus on Lévi-Strauss' analysis of the meaning of myth and the way in which myth produces meaning compared to other creative endeavors, are Lévi-Strauss' analyses not just of individual myths (for the fact that a particular myth has a particular structure says nothing about any sort of universal functioning of the mind or about myth in general) but of mythic elements recurring, sometimes in transposed manner, across very broad geographical areas: for example the Pan-American equivalence between twins, hare-lips, and those born feetfirst (1979).

There is nothing natural or necessary about these elements. No sort of environmental or political-economic factor can be seen as determinative or even particularly influential here, for these are associations which occur on a Pan-American scale without respect to particular environmental circumstances or level of political integration. Fur-