The Dualism of Lévi-Strauss

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I also try to open the door to the mess that is in my head and yours.

Abbie Hoffman

THE AIMS of this paper are to examine the concept of duality which is the basis of Lévi-Strauss’s work and to evaluate it as a model for the understanding of human society and human thought.

In Chapter 6 of Tristes Tropiques, Lévi-Strauss (1961:54) relates how as a student of philosophy he

Began to learn how any problem, whether grave or trivial, can be resolved. The method never varies. First you establish the traditional “two views” of the question. You then put forward a commonsense justification of the one, only to refute it by the other. Finally you send them both packing by the use of a third interpretation, in which both the others are shown to be equally unsatisfactory.

He “turned away in disgust” from “this form of mental gymnastics”—so he says. However, it seems that his gymnastic training had set his mental muscles for life.

His springboard was Mauss’s Essai sur le Don which inspired his basic axiom that reciprocity is the basis of human society. I call it an axiom because Lévi-Strauss justifies it only by assertions, such as: “One must appeal to certain fundamental structures of the human mind” (Lévi-Strauss 1949:95). These structures consist of a pattern of opposed dualities. How do we know this? Because we see from all human behavior that the human mind always constructs logical categories based on the binary principle. Why does the human mind do this? Because of its fundamental structure. So we have a circular argument. But a circle is vicious only if you keep running round it. It is beautiful and useful as the base for a structure.

The work of Lévi-Strauss should be evaluated in terms of his own aims. He is “one of those who regard anthropology as a sort of empirical philosophy” (Needham 1967:384). He believes that the human mind, in particular the unconscious mind, has a certain structure which is manifested in all symbolic systems, i.e., all aspects of culture and even in the material world:

1 This paper in an earlier version was read at the meetings of the American Anthropological Association in New Orleans in November, 1969.
Les lois de la pensée—primitive ou civilisée—sont les mêmes que celles qui s'expriment dans la réalité physique et dans la réalité sociale, qui n'en est elle-même qu'un des aspects (Lévi-Strauss 1949: 561).

This may seem a bold article of faith, but it is actually little more than every scientist's assumption that the universe and every aspect of it, including the human mind, are structured. Lévi-Strauss only adds that the structure is binary and is revealed in every phenomenon if only the analysis goes deep enough. He sometimes calls his method of analysis "explication," which is often translated as "explanation." But I think he uses the word more in its basic sense of "unfolding" as one unfolds a piece of cloth to reveal that what appear to be meaningless markings on the folded material form a symmetrical design on the unfolded fabric. Lévi-Strauss reveals patterns rather than conducts arguments; this is why his later works are symphonic rather than linear in form.

Lévi-Strauss often asserts that the binary structure of the human mind is manifested in the binary nature of the three major systems of human exchange: economics, kinship and language. But the human mind itself is a given, a reality, not merely a concept inducted from these manifestations; Lévi-Strauss never ceases to be a philosopher.

The starting point of his universal dialectical model is a basic problem of philosophy: the phenomenon of awareness, the I who thinks and the Me who is both subject and object of the I's thinking.

The I-Me dichotomy is paradoxical. The I, the thinking self, is part of the Me, the thought-of self. Yet in order to think of the Me, the I must move outside it. How can the I be part of the Me and yet, being outside it, not part of it? If the mind of the thinker contains the object of the thinking, how can the part contain the whole?

From this first paradoxical dichotomy comes the second, which is equally paradoxical. Man is the only self-conscious animal. This distinguishes man from the rest of nature. Man is part of nature and yet separate from it. Thus the Nature-Culture dichotomy is self-contradictory in exactly the same way as the I-Me dichotomy. The two dichotomies are parallel, and yet one is derived from the other.

This is the theme of Lévi-Strauss's work; from The Savage Mind on, all his books consist of variations on it, and it is apparent in all his earlier work, too.

The I-Me paradox is painful to the philosopher. Anthropology provides him with a way of externalizing the paradox. By manipulating it he can relieve the tension. Simonis explains how Lévi-Strauss uses the various fields of anthropology as a kind of philosophical therapy:

Anthropology (or ethnology) as philosophy is the starting point which separates it from sociology, as stated in The Scope of Anthropology. Anthropology as psychology is the finishing point.

1 "the laws of thought—primitive or civilized—are the same as the laws which are expressed in physical reality and social reality; the latter itself is only one aspect of them." (Except where stated otherwise, translations are my own.)