Structuralism
ANTH 348 : Ideas of Culture

*For Calvin & Hobbes fans*

Claude Levi-Strauss (1908 - 2009)
- *Totemism*, 1963*
- *Structural Anthropology, Volume I*, 1963
- *The Savage Mind*, 1966
- *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 1969
- *The Raw and The Cooked*, 1969
- *From Honey to Ashes*, 1973
- *Tristes Tropiques*, 1974
- *Structural Anthropology, Volume II*, 1976
*All refer to English translations of original publications in French.

Levi-Strauss on video
- [Claude Levi-Strauss](#)
- [Claude Levi-Strauss: Return to the Amazon](#)
- [Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss dies aged 100.](#)
- ANALYSIS: "Lévi-Strauss' work was the pinnacle of structuralism in France".

Claude Levi-Strauss
- Educated at La Sorbonne & University of Paris.
- Traveled to Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1934 to teach.
- Did fieldwork in Brazilian interior with several Indian groups: Bororo, Tupi, Nambikwara.
- Although limited, this fieldwork altered his view of "primitive" peoples.
- Taught in Sao Paulo, New School for Social Research (NY) and the College De France.

*Levi-Strauss and his wife, Dina, in their tent while doing fieldwork in Mato Grosso, Brazil*
Claude Levi-Strauss

- Influenced by writings of Emile Durkheim & Marcel Mauss.
- Also ideas of Prague School of Structural Linguistics, especially, Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson.
- Emphasis on synchronic/descriptive study of language rather than the diachronic/historical study.
- Levi-Strauss sought to use linguistics as a model for other social sciences.
- Like language, culture is a collection of arbitrary symbols.

Claude Levi-Strauss

- Not interested in meaning of specific symbols
- Instead looking for patterned way that elements relate to one another in overall system.
- Languages are built up on contrasts between sounds (minimal pairs).
- Phonemes are arbitrary units of sound
- Are not meaningful by themselves & must be combined according to some pattern.

Claude Levi-Strauss

- Structure – underlying principles of social life.
  - To be found in the mind, not on the ground in social relations, as Radcliffe Brown claimed.
- Levi-Strauss searched for universal structural principles in three main areas of study
  - classification systems
  - kinship systems
  - myth.

Claude Levi-Strauss

- In The Elementary Structures of Kinship, Levi-Strauss looked at marriage & exchange of women as commodities.
- Incest taboo necessitates selection of spouse from outside family.
- Binary distinction between kin & non-kin is resolved by reciprocal exchange of women & formation of kin networks.
- LS believed fundamental building block of “primitive” kinship structure is the avunculate – relationship between maternal uncle & sister’s son.
- Is the “true atom of kinship” & building block of more complex systems.

Claude Levi-Strauss

- It only makes sense as part of a larger system.
- In numerous analyses of myth, Levi-Strauss tried to examine the unconscious universal patterning of human thought.
- Claims it is only found in its uncontaminated form in "primitive" society.
- In Western society it is buried under layers of cultural interference.
- Must break down myths into constituent elements and uncover the unconscious meaning found in binary relationships.
- Uncovering the hidden structural core will reveal the essential elements of human thought.
Criticisms of Structuralism

- Lack of empiricism
  - many have noted that for Levi-Strauss, empirical reality is irrelevant.
- Structural explanations are immune from falsification
  - they cannot be replicated.
- Make statements that are supposedly valid for all cultures but does so on the basis of relatively few examples.
- Some feel that Levi-Strauss had tendency to selectively cull myths from around world – without concern for any cultural, temporal, or spatial boundaries – in order to find corroborating cases.
- Claimed unitary messages are inherent in the architecture of the human mind.