

Anti-Narcissus: the idea of anthropology as a minor science

— lectures on structuralism and after —

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1. Out of the boudoir

If colonialism was an important historical *a priori* of anthropology as an intellectual project, indications exist to suggest that its present karmic cycle is about to be completed just as other possibilities emerge on the horizon. If so, it clearly becomes imperative that we conclude the process of the discipline's decolonization by transposing our analysis to anthropology's plane of epistemic inauguration. This is an arduous task, not to be confused with eternal declarations of our best ideological intentions or with the somewhat undignified claim to the urgent 'concrete' relevance of the matters that we bring into focus. But we need to try. The guilt trips and blame games are over. Time to think.

These lectures are an extended commentary on the transformations in anthropology correlated with the emergence in our wider intellectual landscape of flat ontologies, which (pre)conceive the real both as an immanent dynamic multiplicity in a state of continuous variation, rather than the manifestation of constant or transcendent principles, and as a differentiating relation, that is, as a disjunctive synthesis of heterogenic elements, rather than a dialectical ('horizontal') opposition or a hierarchical ('vertical') totalization. This conception of 'transversal' difference which is constituted within the historical backwash of Language as an anthropological macroparadigm, specifically problematizes the double metaphysical dualism between 'sign' and 'referent' (the logical order of reasons and the material order of causes) and 'person' and 'thing' (the social order of subjects and the natural order of objects), while simultaneously aiming to avoid any reductionist solution. From the viewpoint of the periodizations we periodically borrow from other disciplines, it could be said that the ontology of difference is 'neo-baroque' (C. Kwa), escaping the canonical alternation to which the history of anthropology is usually reduced, that is, between the classical mechanistic atomism (with the associated individual-society dichotomy) and the romantic organicist holism (with its nature-culture dualism).

2. From great divides to small multiplicities

The second general point to be argued is that anthropological theories are developed in continuity with the conceptual pragmatics or thought styles of the collectives we study. A

deeper consideration of these styles, from the viewpoint of elaborating an anthropological concept of concept — one of the objectives that seem to us central to consolidating a theoretically decolonizing anthropology —, shows their importance in the contemporary emergence of a new concept of anthropology, for which the description of the conditions of ontological self-determination of the collectives studied prevails absolutely over the epistemocentric reduction of human (and non-human) thought to a recognition device: thinking as classifying, predicating, judging and representing. To accept the opportunity and the relevance of this task of *'penser autrement'* about thought is, thus, to commit oneself to the project of developing an anthropological theory of the imagination capable of matching the intellectual creativity and reflexivity manifested in the collective life of (human and non-human) peoples.

The 'Anti-Narcissus' of the lecture series title is meant to suggest that anthropology is already writing the first chapters of its own *Anti-Oedipus*. If Oedipus is the founding myth of psychoanalysis, Narcissus could be seen as the emblematic figure for a discipline obsessed with the question of determining which fundamental attribute distinguishes the subject of anthropological discourse from everything it is not, namely, the non-western, the non-modern or the non-human. What would this attribute be? Capitalism, rationality, individualism, Christianity? Or the special creation, the immortal soul, Dasein, corticalization, neotenic birth, language, labour, desire, meta-intentionality? It matters little. Against the great divides, an anti-narcissist or minor anthropology allows the proliferation of small multiplicities. Since the question is not one of simply abolishing the line that unites-separates sign and world, persons and things, 'us' and 'them,' humans and non-humans — as I said, no reductionist solution, no off-the-shelf monism — but of indefining this line, inflecting it in an infinitely complex curve. In sum, it is not a question of deleting the contours, but of folding them, multiplying them, breaking them and fractalizing them (Derrida). A generalized chromatism.

3. After structuralism, and then again

The chapters of this *Anti-Narcissus* in progress are being written by people like Roy Wagner (the notion of a reverse anthropology, the semiotic phenomenology of the concept of culture), Marilyn Strathern (the cross-deconstruction of feminism and anthropology, the ideas of an 'indigenous aesthetics' and an 'indigenous analysis' which form something like the two parts of an anthropological *Critique of Impure Reason*), Bruno Latour (the temporally paradoxical concept of 'never-having-been' modern, the anti-critical deconstruction of the 'fetishism'

concept), to name but a few of our colleagues. But well before any of these there was already Lévi-Strauss, the great precursor of post-structuralism, who advanced the radically anti-sociological (in other words, anti-narcissist) thesis of anthropology as the 'social science of the observed.'

The third point to be argued in these lectures is that the analytic potential of structuralism is far from exhausted, and the phase of brutally simplifying readings of Lévi-Strauss's work – a dialectically necessary simplification, no doubt, for the prodigious flourishing of new themes and problems in anthropology over the last thirty years – is nearing its end. After the overhauling of evolutionism by cognitive psycho-anthropology, this perpetually promising science, and after the resurgence of diffusionism with the political economy of globalization and the critique of the 'culture of colonialism,' perhaps it is time for us to unforget and recomplexify — as we used to say, 'rethink' — structuralism.

We intend to show that many of the more interesting responses to structuralism involved a reconsideration of what we could call the 'sacrificial' dimension of *la pensée sauvage*. (We are referring here to the contrast between 'totemism' and 'sacrifice' developed in *The Savage Mind*.) However, it is possible to show that Lévi-Strauss's work collaborated actively with much of its future subversion. If, as Schneider and Dumont argued, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* is a 'pre-structuralist' book, then the later and more extensive phase of Lévi-Strauss's work — the *Mythologiques* tetralogy and the three subsequent "*petites Mythologiques*" —, which very few non-Americanist anthropologists have read closely, is clearly post-structuralist. The notion of society is effaced here as the focus shifts to intersocietal narrative transformations; the nature/culture opposition ceases to be a universal anthropological condition and transforms definitively into an Amerindian mythic theme, and, above all, the objects called 'structures' disappear almost completely in favour of a fundamental relation-operation, transformation. The relations that constitute Amerindian narratives, rather than forming combinatory totalities within a discrete logical distribution in concomitant variation and dialectical tension with the socioethnographic realia, exemplify the rhizomatic principles of 'connection and heterogeneity,' 'multiplicity,' 'assignifying rupture' and 'cartography' which the theorists par excellence of post-structuralism, Deleuze and Guattari, later counterposed to the structural models.

4. Déjà par-delà

Lévi-Strauss's work, almost from its outset, contains a post-structuralist subtext or counter-text.

Hence, structuralism's supposed partiality for symmetric, reversible and discrete dual oppositions (such as those of the totemic schema) is disproven not only by the celebrated critique of the concept of dual organizations in his 1956 article — which postulates ternarism and continuity as anterior to binarism and discontinuity — but furthermore, by the equally early and still more polemical 'canonical formula' of myth, which may be everything but symmetric and reversible. It is certainly no accident that Lévi-Strauss' last two mythological books are constructed as developments of precisely these two figures of 'anti-static' dualism: *The Jealous Potter* (1985) is a systematic illustration of the canonical formula, while the *History of Lynx* (1991) focuses on the dynamic instability of Amerindian dualities. This suggests that we are faced by a single macro-structure, of which the canonical formula and the dynamic dualism are but two formulations.

Finally, and this is a point that has received little attention, we are going to argue that the *Mythologiques* are *not* a work centred on the discontinuous passage from Nature to Culture, but on its inverse. With the partial exception of the first chapters of *The Raw and the Cooked*, the seven books from the series reveal a fascination with the "mythologies of ambiguity", the "mythologies of fluxions", the regressive and retrograde transitions from Culture to Nature, small intervals, short periodicities, rhapsodic repetitions, analogical models, perpetual disequilibria, continual deformations à la Darcy Thompson. Honey and sexual seduction, chromatism and poison, the moon and androgyny, eclipses and the Klein bottle, the Jurupari flutes — it could be said that the content of Amerindian mythology comprises a negation of the form of myth itself, insofar as it thinks a continuum whose destruction is the very condition of thought. More than post-structuralist, the *Mythologiques* suggest the possibility of a radical *exostructuralism*, the exploration of the dark side — the reverse side — of the structuralist moon. A lunar metaphysics of the multiple.