

Claude Lévi-Strauss's Contribution to the Race Question: *Race and History*

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When I started doing research on race in different institutional domains, if someone would have told me that I would be drawn to the work of structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss, I would have laughed. When I started my journey to study how race and inequality are reproduced in religion, medicine, development, education, and media, I had been inspired by Marx, Boas, Mead, Du Bois, Hurston, Geertz—anybody but Lévi-Strauss. But when Ira Bashkow asked me which ancestor I would voice for his 2017 AAA roundtable, I chose Lévi-Strauss and his fifty-page 1952 booklet entitled *Race and History*. This booklet was one of a series written by cultural anthropologists for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to try to combat racism (Muller-Wille 2010).

UNESCO AND THE CONTEXT OF RACE AND HISTORY

In order to understand what motivated Lévi-Strauss to publish his unique perspective on the humanness of human prejudice, it is important to understand the history of UNESCO. During World War II, many European and American leaders were already discussing ways to prevent another war fueled by racism and anti-Semitism. They concluded that building peace required citizens of modern nation-states to be taught to appreciate and tolerate cultural diversity in order to see the “other” as human. Fulfilling that vision, UNESCO was ratified in 1946 as an international organization dedicated to peace, intercultural exchange, human rights, and freedom through the promotion of science and education.

One of its first agenda items was to issue a scientific statement on race. To that end, UNESCO commissioned a group of leading anthropologists, sociologists, biologists, and psychologists to write a statement on “the race question” (Hazard 2012). They wanted the statement to explain to the public why race was nothing more than a “social myth” and racism “one of the social evils” (UNESCO 1950). Two anthropologists contributed to this first version of *The Race Question*, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Ashley Montagu. This

1950 version, which I will call the original statement, represents the cutting edge of scientific and social scientific theories on race even today. It is an extraordinary statement that I continue to use in my own teaching.

UNESCO leaders apparently thought that, given the horrors of World War II, debunking race as a meaningful category of biological difference would be easy. But if they imagined that the original 1950 statement would be universally embraced, they were sorely mistaken. Unfortunately, *The Race Question* was far too radical for its time, and it was criticized by scientists and social scientists who remained committed to locating racial difference in behavior and biology. Based on their criticism, the original version of the statement was significantly revised by another group of scholars, and a new, and official, statement was published in 1951 (UNESCO 1951).

In the 1951 official version, the authors argue that the data were not yet in on race and difference and that what scientists knew thus far (or thought they knew) indicated that racial groups were indeed distinct and bounded. In this revised statement, the idea that race is a “social myth” was replaced with:

The concept of race is unanimously regarded by anthropologists as a classificatory device providing a zoological frame within which the various groups of mankind may be arranged and by means of which studies of evolutionary processes can be facilitated. In its anthropological sense, the word “race” should be reserved for groups of mankind possessing well-developed and primarily heritable physical differences from other groups. (UNESCO 1951, 1)

Not without reason, this revised statement was regarded by public commentators as “a victory for racism and the defeat of a naive humanitarianism” (UNESCO 1952, 7).

A chastened UNESCO tried to explain the 1951 revisions in a document entitled *The Race Concept: Results of an Inquiry* (UNESCO 1952). This document, which I refer to as the Inquiry, is even more dreadful than the 1951 statement itself. It includes exchanges between supporters of the original 1950 statement and critics who were behind the 1951 revised statement. Ultimately (and oddly) it both defends the revisionists and distances itself from the authority of their claims. The Inquiry's editors wrote, “It is important to avoid presenting the new [1951] Statement as an authoritative manifesto published by Unesco as the last word on the race question” (UNESCO 1952, 8). By so saying, they

effectively declared the 1951 statement on race irrelevant to UNESCO's mission. Even so, its publication set into motion a research agenda in the field of physical anthropology that lasted for three decades (Muller-Wille 2010).

Anyone reading the 1951 revised statement today will recognize that it belongs in the enormous dustbin of bad scholarship on race. But I want to recall this inauspicious history of the UNESCO statement to highlight, once again, how improbable it might seem for an African American scholar to find inspiration for her own work on race and inequality in a related UNESCO statement, written by one of the original coauthors.

CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS'S RACE AND HISTORY

Lévi-Strauss did not participate in the 1951 rewriting and instead published a separate UNESCO booklet entitled *Race and History* (1952). While I do not know what motivated Lévi-Strauss, I choose to read his booklet as a subversive retort to the 1951 statement's flaws. The fact that UNESCO published Lévi-Strauss's text speaks to the institution's own efforts to subvert both the 1951 statement and the Inquiry. In *Race and History*, not only does Lévi-Strauss challenge zoological theories of racial difference, but more radically he challenges the very idea of human progress that underlies racism.

What Lévi-Strauss homed in on was a celebration of human rights built on the foundation of what we now describe as modernization theory, or the idea that history is proceeding along a unilinear trajectory from barbarism to freedom, and that Europe and white people in the United States represent the leading edge of this historical movement (Hazard 2012; Rist 2002). Lévi-Strauss recognized that one cannot simultaneously disavow racism, or the idea that some groups are better than others, without also doing away with the idea that cultures evolve or that history is a totalizing process (Visweswaran 2003).

Lévi-Strauss explicitly rejected the evolutionary model of cultural change just before economist Walt Whitman Rostow published his five stages of economic growth (Rostow 1960). Rostow famously theorized that all economies transition linearly from "traditional" (egalitarian with limited technologies) to "high mass consumption" (disposable incomes and advanced industry). Because almost all countries now have some form of industrialization, one could argue that at one level Rostow was right. His model, however, misses the fact that communities deliberately break away from states and reject technologies that limit their sovereignty (Scott 2010). Also, states experience deindustrialization, which was the case in Zambia in the 1970s after the collapse of the global copper market (Ferguson 1999). Despite the deficiencies of Rostow's model, linear notions of human progress came to dominate economic development theories in political science and economics for over half a century.

Against this tide of ethnocentric theorizing, Lévi-Strauss embraced a stochastic model of cultural change, where new-

ness emerges from combinatory randomness. He compared cultural change to genetic mutations and meiosis, where a random selection of genes—50 percent from each parent—produce a unique offspring (Muller-Wille 2010). He used these metaphors to represent how cultures borrow ideas and technologies from one another to produce unique and surprising sensibilities and material cultures. Lévi-Strauss also used metaphors of gambling to represent how "history" leads to cultural diversity and the illusion of linear progress.

Following the Holocaust, the fear was that pointing out cultural differences encouraged unfavorable comparisons between the West and the Rest. To avoid negative comparisons, postwar social scientists felt compelled to argue that all cultures and people have the same potential—a seemingly innocuous statement unless you ask the obvious follow-up question: The potential for what? The implicit answer: to be like white Europeans and Americans. In contrast, Lévi-Strauss recognized that trying to make the point that all cultures and people are essentially the same leads us back to unfavorable comparisons because it is obvious how culturally distinct tribes in the Amazon are from French nationals in Paris, for example.

To get at the violence underlying a desire to make others into our own image, in *Race and History* Lévi-Strauss opens by asserting that the impulse to erase cultural difference is "an inversion of the racist doctrine," by which he means they are fundamentally similar (Lévi-Strauss 1952, 5). He uses examples of violence to describe how this impulse to erase difference has manifested in behavior:

In the Greater Antilles, a few years after the discovery of America, while the Spaniards were sending out Commissions of investigation to discover whether or not the natives had a soul, the latter spent their time drowning white prisoners in order to ascertain by long observation, whether or not their bodies would decompose. (Lévi-Strauss 1952, 12)

He goes on to describe this anecdote as representative of the paradox in cultural relativism.

The more we claim to discriminate between cultures and customs as good and bad the more completely do we identify ourselves with those we would condemn. By refusing to consider as human those who seem to us to be the most "savage" or "barbarous" of their representatives, we merely adopt one of their own characteristic attitudes. The barbarian is, first and foremost, the man who believes in barbarism. (Lévi-Strauss 1952, 12)

In the section titled "The Idea of Progress," Lévi-Strauss states:

Progress is neither continuous nor inevitable; its course consists in a series of leaps and bounds, or, as the biologists would say, mutations. These leaps and bounds are not always in the same direction; the general trend might change too, rather like the progress of the knight in chess, who always has several moves open to him but never in the same direction. Advancing humanity can hardly be likened to a person climbing stairs . . . a more accurate metaphor would be that of a gambler who has staked his money on several dice and, at each throw, sees them scatter over the cloth, giving a different score each time. What he wins on one, he is always liable to lose on another, and it is only occasionally

that history is “cumulative,” that is to say, that the scores add up to a lucky combination. (Lévi-Strauss 1952, 22)

Lévi-Strauss considered the metaphor of rolling dice as applicable to cultural traits as it was to biological traits. Genes, like culture, are the end result of diffusion, exchange, and the type of binary juxtapositions and bricolage that we see in language and myth. Continuing this gambling metaphor in a later section titled “Collaboration between Culture,” he states:

The situation of the various cultures which have achieved the most cumulative forms of history is very similar. Such history has never been produced by isolated cultures but by cultures which, voluntarily or involuntarily, have combined their play and, by a wide variety of means (migration, borrowing, trade and warfare), have formed . . . coalitions . . . This brings out very clearly the absurdity of claiming that one culture is superior to another. For if a culture were left to its own resources, it could never hope to be “superior”; like the single gambler, it would never manage to achieve more than short series of a few units, and the prospect of a long series turning up in its history would be so slight that all hope of it would depend on the ability to continue the game for a time infinitely longer than the whole period of human history to date. (Lévi-Strauss 1952, 41)

In *Race and History*, Lévi-Strauss's goal was to assert that cultures are in fact not equal, but unique, and that these differences must not be read as inferiority, or as if a culture has yet to arrive at some crucial developmental stage of mass production and consumption. Rather than *products* of history, cultures are *accidents*—and therefore incommensurable. From Lévi-Strauss's perspective, the UNESCO rhetoric that all cultures are equal, while well-intentioned, only invites comparisons that could bolster racist ideas about biological inferiority and cultural backwardness.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE AND HISTORY

After over twenty years in anthropology, I have walked through a veil. This new perspective has changed my appreciation for older works by anthropologists including Claude Lévi-Strauss. African American students often refuse to take anthropology courses because they are turned off by words like “savage” and “primitive.” Who isn't? I ultimately came to understand that the most brilliant and subversive ancestors of our discipline used the language of the day because it was necessary to scaffold radical new ideas on old. Rhetorically deploying the language of the day, Lévi-Strauss was able to assert that Europeans were as savage as the “other” because all humans are similarly constrained by how our minds make sense of the world, through a grammar of relationality (Lévi-Strauss 1966).

In my own work on race, I have noted that one of the most significant reasons why institutions reproduce race and inequality is because of the underlying assumption that blacks are lacking—genetically, socially, intellectually, materially. In keeping with this notion of blacks as less evolved than whites, the interventions designed to ameliorate disparities are often predicated on beliefs about the need for black self-improvement. Lost in these discourses is any celebration

of the extraordinary resilience of a people who struggled for more than two hundred years to be under the aegis of the rule of law, both in the United States and colonial Africa. This resilience is best exemplified by the fact that in the face of wealth, employment, housing discrimination, mass incarceration, and educational inequities, black health disparities are relatively miniscule (Rouse 2016).

Because social scientists often overlook the aspects of “black culture” that work, policy efforts often focus on fixing black people rather than on the structures that constrain their behavior (Kelley 1997). In health care, for example, the presumption that higher rates of morbidity and mortality among African Americans are due to deficiencies in knowledge, behavior, or genetics has led health-policy experts to put resources toward improving outcomes that are largely unhelpful (Rouse 2009). Recent “enlightened” health policies, for example, have focused on targeting the genetic differences responsible for health disparities, once again collapsing race and biology. Similarly, culture of poverty theories, which explain intergenerational poverty as the outcome of poor people acting in ways that are incompatible with wealth accumulation, have been used to explain disproportionate rates of black poverty and mass incarceration. In the case of educational disparities, which manifest in disproportionate rates of labeling black students as learning disabled, segregated advanced placement courses, and disproportionate rates of suspension, educational-policy research often focuses less on structural issues like poorly financed schools and racism, and more on test scores, curriculum, and student motivation. In other words, what I have observed ethnographically is that liberal notions of progress often play as much of a role in reproducing structural inequalities as racism.

Rejecting the idea that Africans and African Americans need to mimic white Europeans and Americans in order to be taken seriously is often the first step black folks take toward liberating themselves from self-hatred. In the case of the Nation of Islam and other black radical religions, rejecting the measures of progress and enlightenment used by whites to determine their worth was essential for freeing them from their own abjection (Rouse, Jackson, and Frederick 2016). These groups have challenged white supremacy by promoting Afro-centrism, an epistemology and ontology that highlights the role of blacks as subjects rather than objects in history. Many who discover Afro-centrism say it attracted them because it was the first time they were told about the accomplishments of Africans and African Americans in history. In Afro-centric recapitulations of history, rather than being backward, Africans are described as having civilized the world. Using history in this way to challenge white supremacy certainly empowers blacks psychologically. Unfortunately, by merely inverting the racial hierarchy, rather than rejecting comparisons altogether, Afro-centrism ultimately reproduces the cultural relativism paradox described by Lévi-Strauss.

In the last sixty years, evolutionary theories of culture, and narrow definitions of a good life, continue to shape

the international aid regime's economic and political policy agendas. The notion of cultural deficit also allows scholars to write papers like "The Case for Colonialism," which was published in the summer of 2017 in *Third World Quarterly* (Gilley 2018). This paper argues that Europe should re-colonize Africa. Why? To improve a series of metrics that are actually the same metrics used by the international aid regime to articulate why structural adjustments, foreign direct investment, extractive industries, and the securing of private property are so critical to Africa's development. Lost in these metrics are examples of the genius of Liberians and Sierra Leoneans who radically slowed the Ebola outbreak in 2014, long before Western institutions stepped in.

Lévi-Strauss's radical theses on race and history have not always sat well in development circles. Lévi-Strauss presented a similar version of his *Race and History* argument in a talk at UNESCO in 1971 entitled "Race and Culture." The reception to that talk was hostile. In the preface of *A View from Afar*, Lévi-Strauss gives detailed reasons why people who celebrated UNESCO's mission treated his talk as blasphemous (Lévi-Strauss 1992, xiv–xvi). In essence, they were unwilling to acknowledge the cognitive dissonance required to both claim not to be racist and work to remake the developing world in the image of Western Europe and America. Lévi-Strauss gave almost the same talk again at UNESCO in 2005 to an adoring crowd. By 2005, Indigenous rights were being celebrated and the idea of preserving traditional cultures was in vogue. Changing political discourses have altered how Lévi-Strauss's theories have been received, but Lévi-Strauss never changed his position about race. For Lévi-Strauss, zoological categories of racial difference merely provided pseudo-scientific authorization for ethnocentric theories of human progress and value.

UNESCO wanted the statements it commissioned to support the idea that all humans were equal and that with the right opportunities all cultures could evolve similarly. But Lévi-Strauss had something far more radical in mind when he wrote *Race and History*. What he read in UNESCO's efforts to humanize the "Third World" was a form of racism that he recognized as deeply human but also wrong and destructive. Lévi-Strauss believed that being part of a culture requires a commitment to its beliefs and values to the exclusion of others. He wrote, "Cultures are not unaware of one another, they even borrow from one another on occasion; but, in order not to perish, they must, in other connections, remain somewhat impermeable toward one another" (1992, xviv–xv). When it comes to rethinking race, and the source of racial disparities, one can learn from Lévi-Strauss's unapologetic commitment to cultural relativism. Cultural value comparisons and progress narratives lead us right back to treating racial, ethnic, and cultural differences as evidence that something is lacking. Lévi-Strauss argued that instead of thinking that the West is more advanced, we must embrace how truly primitive we all are.

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