

HUMANITY, WHAT IS IT?
an interview with Claude Lévi-Strauss

It is a rare opportunity to present to an anthropological audience an expressive and introspective portrait of the culture of anthropology as painted by one of its most eminent and unique natives, Claude Lévi-Strauss. In this auto-ethnographic account, Lévi-Strauss expresses views, convictions and mere sentiments concerning a wide range of subjects pertinent to his culture, many pertaining to his opinion of and high regard for the late A. L. Kroeber, for whom our society was named. This interview, edited and translated by the Editor, appeared in the Paris paper l'Express October 20, 1960.

What is humanity? Which societies most intrigue you? Is not anthropology a perilous religion? In what way do the Indians interest psychoanalysts? Claude Lévi-Strauss, professor at the College de France, is interviewed.

Alfred Louis Kroeber, last survivor of the grand tradition of American ethnologists has recently died at the age of 84 years (in Paris, on October 5, 1960). Claude Lévi-Strauss regarded him as his master. He speaks here of what this loss means to world ethnology and answers Madeleine Chapsal's questions about this large and mysterious science.

Q. Who was Alfred Louis Kroeber, who has just died, and whom you consider your master?

A. He is the last of the North American ethnologists to have known the Indians. Not untamed Red Skins--certainly they are no longer--rather those who had been so in their youth. Kroeber was born in 1876. His first work was in the country of the Arapaho and dates from 1900. The penetration of the West by the American whites did not begin until about 1850, and was not fully accomplished until about 1880. Consequently, old people of 70 or 80 years of age who might have known Kroeber had already spent the larger part of their lives as wild Indians. With Kroeber it is truly the America before Christopher Columbus which has died completely.

Q. Where exactly did these Indians of Kroeber's live?

A. In California. Their extermination probably dates from 1880, since there were about 150,000 in 1850 and in excess of 20,000 after 1880. Kroeber also told me a couple of weeks ago in Austria--we were together at the colloquium at Burg-Wartenstein--that it had been only two or three years since he had returned for the last time to the Yurok, some of whom live in quite small bands of ten people, in some cases a solitary family, to visit one lone person who still speaks the native tongue, and who remembers the myths and legends. They are people who lived by hunting and gathering and who probably represent what were the most archaic groups in America.

TOTEM AND TABOO

Q. Was Kroeber the only one interested in them (the Yurok)?

A. No. There have been other ethnologists. However, Kroeber was the only one to have had such strong and personal ties with them. There have also been psychoanalysts (e.g. Erikson--Editor). What's more, they have recently been fascinated by the Indians of California, in part under the influence of Kroeber. He himself had pursued educational psychology (psychanalyse didactique) for three years, around 1920, I believe, while continuing his career.

Q. Did he know Freud?

A. I don't believe so, but he corresponded with him, and produced two reviews of Freud's book on primitive societies, Totem and Taboo. The first, about 1920 (cf. Kroeber, 1920--Editor), demolished it completely.

The second, which was much more subtle, attempted to demonstrate in what manner an ethnologist of a certain point of view might accept some of the theses of Totem and Taboo.

Q. In what way, for example, might the Indians of California interest psychoanalysts?

A. I had in mind the fact that psychoanalysts refer to their "anal character" (refers specifically to the Yurok. Cf. Erikson, 1943; Posinsky, 1956, 1957; Kroeber, 1959. Editor). This is a matter, in effect, of passionate acquisitiveness, of people who accumulated treasures which generally consisted of large obsidian blades. These blades, of which some are longer than a meter or even a meter and a half, could not be used for anything, but were considered extremely precious objects. These were exhibited at ceremonies on the occasion of games which I would estimate as approaching poker games, since it was a matter of defeating the opponent by the display of more important and beautiful blades. But this was a matter of strategy, a "bluff". If one brought out immediately the best blade he had, he risked defeat. It was therefore always necessary to persuade the adversary to keep trying to gain the advantage, while secretly holding back the best blades, or "cards" . . . (Lévi-Strauss is referring to the wealth display associated with the world renewal ceremonies of northwest California, not to be confused with the hand or gambling game which actually was a normal part of the annual festivities; cf. Kroeber and Gifford, 1949--Editor).

Q. Beyond the fact that Kroeber was the last link with the wild American Indian, what made him, in your eyes, an exceptional personality?

A. He was a man of extraordinary vigor who all his life had been not

only a field ethnographer--he had studied directly a considerable number of (aboriginal) American groups--but was also an archaeologist. He carried out excavations in Peru which permitted proposing certain classifications of ancient Peruvian cultures which henceforth have remained classic. He was a historian of the vanished populations of northern South America, such as the Chibcha, and a considerable portion of his work was of a philosophical character. He has even studied variations in female fashions of the last century! He has done linguistics, and has done sociological investigations, devoting an entire book to the relationships between the geographical milieux of North America and the societies which developed there (cf. Kroeber, 1939--Editor). Finally, he was a man of most exceptional curiosity and intensity of intellect.

Q. But primarily an ethnologist?

A. Yes. What's more, he told me upon several occasions how surprised he was to see that young contemporary American ethnologists were choosing ethnology for quite arbitrary reasons, since they might choose sociology or psychology, as a specific social science among many. For Kroeber and the men of his generation, ethnology has not been a science in the same sense as the others. Anthropology for him was a religion. (There can be little doubt that Kroeber personally saw his anthropological science as approaching religion. Cf. Count 1960:24-25, quoting Kroeber 1947--Editor).

Q. But is it not a perilous religion? By teaching to whoever practices it that all moral codes, all institutions, all forms of society are systems which might as easily have never existed, and in all cases are replicated perpetually, doesn't the ethnologist risk feeling baffled, dizzy?

A. I personally think, to the contrary, that such a thing permits him to press closer to wisdom. . . .

ON GOOD GUYS

Q. How so?

A. Well! Precisely due to the conviction that nothing of what he observes is basically essential. That which seems of utmost importance is in reality nothing more than what it represents within the limits in which it is situated in a certain time scale. If the ethnologist is willing, by means of gymnastics habitual to him, to bring about a conversion to place himself--if but for an instant--on the scale of centuries or millenia, instead of placing himself on the scale of mere decades--things which appear most momentous would appear to him in a different light.

Q. If we were to believe that you study only the customs of Man, basically there would be some error. What essentially interests you about human nature? Its reflections? Its constitution?

A. Yes. But our contribution to the knowledge of human nature consists in approaching it in another manner, from another perspective, and from a different path than that of the psychologist, for example, or the historian. Let us say that we seek to apprehend something in terms of what Sartre calls "totalités" or "les totalisations".

Q. What to you is your means?

A. Attaining distance (éloignement). Not merely because the societies which we are considering are very distant geographically, but as well

because they are equally so with regard to way of life. The expatriation which they demand of us in order to study them dooms us to being unable to catch sight of any but limited properties characteristic at once of them and of human nature. Our science, anthropology, is conditioned by distance, by this estrangement (éloignement) which permits only what is essential to filter out.

Q. Distance, but as well, proximity. Aren't there moments when the ethnologist finds himself face-to-face with a human being, and when it is this human being, and no other, that is the object of his study? When he anticipates intimate contact with him?

A. Yes. But one must make clear distinctions regarding attitudes. In South America, for example, people were not well acquainted with the notion of an ethnologist, and from the moment the latter came to live with them and seemed to be a nice guy (bon garçon), when they were assured of a certain number of material advantages in the form of gifts, nourishment, some blades or beads, well, from then on things were dandy!

Among the people Kroeber studied, the situation was different. Since ethnology began about 1840, all over the continent in general they quickly found out what an ethnologist was. There was perhaps resistance which only time overcame, hesitation, or, on the contrary, vigorous collaboration. These people were conscious that the way of life to which they clung was irrevocably doomed, and that their sole chance to preserve a memory of it for posterity was to work with the ethnologists. . . . They cooperated in full knowledge of the cause for which all was being taken down. And they knew that certain objects, such as particularly precious portative altars, which represented for a tribe its most sacred object, would be carried off to museums, the place where such would be safeguarded. When the last old timer was about to die, he would take his treasures to

the museum, there being no other solution.

Q. Do you believe that we are headed toward a unification of (all) societies?

A. That is another matter that was discussed in Austria with Kroeber. He himself thought that it seemed so, but the other members of the discussion did not believe so. We objected to him that although societies might be tending to become more homogeneous, probably unforeseen points of rupture and cleavage would appear where we would never expect them to do so.

Q. Where? Haven't you the slightest idea? Say, Brittany vs. France (as a whole)?

A. Not likely! Possibly, for example, on the scale of generations. Problems of juvenile delinquency have existed in all times and in all periods, but perhaps today, in the sense that in the scale of one given generation, the distinctions tend to do away with themselves spatially (a traverse l'espace), and those of one generation and the following may criticize each other in a manner considerably more marked. . . .

A most unusual investigation of the folklore of school children is about to take place in Britain. It has been observed that throughout Britain that the types of games and the fashions of children's speech (of which not even the existence has been suspected by adults) have been remarkably homogeneous. It is entirely unknown how the spread is effected.

A GORILLA IS A HUMAN

Q. Well, even were primitive societies to disappear from the face of

the earth, would ethnologists always have work?

A. Yes, since after all ethnology has always been charged with the task of exploring to the very limits that which is under consideration at the moment, in a given time, such as the limits of humanity. There is a curious underlying observation in J.-J. Rousseau which is to be found at the conclusion of his Discours sur l'Inégalité. He begins by complaining that only nature is studied and not Man, and he makes an appeal to people, and to very rich groups, that they might kindly subsidize voyages to set out, having as their goal, the study of Man. (In sum, he presages the large foundations today dedicated to anthropological research!) Then he gives as an example the following: travelers have reported to him most novel accounts concerning societies of very strange beings living in Africa who are called the "gorillas". Through ignorance the travelers called them monkeys, although it is absolutely clear that this was a case of pure prejudice, and that actually these are human beings in the same sense as any other.

Basically Rousseau was mistaken, but he was mistaken in having taken an attitude typical of ethnology: always taking the side of what is thought to be possible for Man, and referring frontier or marginal phenomena back to humanity's core (interieur). We work for a science that ought always to grasp the fringes of the unknown (la bordure de l'inconnu). In that sense there will always be ethnology.

Q. Do ethnologists envisage studying their own societies?

A. The larger a society becomes, the more a stranger it becomes to itself, and the more problems it poses for itself. The Americans, for instance, have become aware that, in the sense that they are a very great society of two hundred million inhabitants, and not like us of forty or

fifty, they do not understand themselves. Up to the present, this has not been a European attitude. If anthropology has likewise developed in America in the course of the last few years, it has not been to study primitive peoples, it has been to study American society.

What made Kroeber's thinking original was that he never attempted to isolate anthropology. On one hand he clung to the natural sciences, on the other, to the humanities. For example, puzzles such as those of bees' language and animal societies were for him problems as essential to the history of the world (natural history) as those dealing with the Mediterranean civilizations of antiquity. Today everyone tends to seal himself off most narrowly in his specialty. Kroeber was in our time one of those universal men such as existed in the Nineteenth century, and who no longer exist.

Q. But isn't it becoming increasingly difficult nowadays to master the totality (l'ensemble) of culture? Isn't it only a matter of learning? Perhaps this is what makes one prudently isolate himself within an area where he is sure to know something.

A. No doubt getting involved in everything exposes one at the same time to a certain naïveté. By the same token we are always liable to speak too often of blunders, since we are concerned with things with which we are not directly familiar. Hence, one must choose.

Q. Is it not the case that the personality of one who pursues your occupation counts more than in another discipline?

A. It counts enormously. Kroeber himself often said that sociologists are people always inclined to play, shall we say, the game of their (own) society. Whether they are for or against it is not important; they

want to settle themselves in the midst of it. The anthropologist, on the contrary, according to Kroeber, is a man unsuited to the comfort of the interior of his own society, and is one who seeks to place himself in rapport with other societies as his primary frame of reference.

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Q. Which societies intrigue you personally as an ethnologist the most?

A. What are extremely fascinating by reputation to an ethnologist are the Melanesian societies. I am not saying that they are the nicest or the most pleasant, but they are the most extraordinary. Aside from their multiplicity within a limited area, they are in a part of the world in which a prodigious quantity of experiences are realized, experiences extraordinarily different from one another. There are societies in which social organization poses all sorts of problems, in which art is most astonishing. Furthermore, this is probably the sole region of the earth where unknown places still exist.

Q. Have you ever been there?

A. No.

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LATIN AND GREEK

Q. Who are the great ethnologists today?

A. In America a generation has come to an end. The founder of American ethnology was Boas, and he died in 1942. The prominent students of Boas remained: Lowie, Radin, and Kroeber. All three have died in the last three years. The most brilliant of the immediately following generation, Kluckhohn, died this summer at age fifty-seven.

Q. And whom, besides, would you cite?

A. The British school is excellent. There is Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, Firth. There are excellent ones in the Netherlands, in Australia.

Q. And in Russia?

A. The Russians are behind due to the War. They have been cut out of the ethnographic production of the rest of the world for a long time. The same holds true in Germany. Germany was the world's leading nation in ethnology until Hitler. There has been a break since. . . . They need to catch up.

Q. Who was the first ethnologist?

A. I cannot answer that question. I mean, I'd tell you it was Herodotus, but there were others before him. That which made our parents and grandparents suffer so in the classroom--Latin and Greek--well, that was something like ethnology! The effort demanded of them was not substantially different from that which we make when we study the Indians of Brazil or the Australians. Yes, they sought to learn to judge their own culture in the expanded perspective which familiarity with varied cultures gives, and in the end is what is called humanism.

Q. And the humanities?

A. I believe that the role played by the studies of the Classics in the past is not essentially different from that which ethnology might have today. Ethnology is simply the humanism of a different world, a world which has expanded, which has gathered again to the bosom of Humanity things which until the present time have been outside. Moreover, in the United States, where the Classics play an extremely weak role in the schools, Americans have constructed for themselves a humanity apart, or ethnology. The study of exotic civilizations has a relatively larger part than the study of the civilizations of Antiquity. With us the proportion is the opposite: ethnology has come only in a sprinkling. But there is no discontinuity.

This I profoundly believe: the humanities are Humanity, and Humanity is at once the savages (sauvages) in the same sense that it is the sages of India and Greece.

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