

CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

Structural
Anthropology

*Translated from the French by Claire Jacobson
and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf*



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May an inconstant disciple dedicate this book which appears in 1958, the year of Emile Durkheim's centenary, to the memory of the founder of *Année Sociologique*: that famed workshop where modern anthropology fashioned part of its tools and which we have abandoned, not so much out of disloyalty as out of the sad conviction that the task would prove too much for us.

Χρυσεον μεν πρωτιστα γενοσ.

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parallel may seem, this formalism converges with certain aspects of Marxian thought.⁵¹

Next—and as a consequence—it introduces for the first time mechanical models which are of the same type as, and intermediate between, those used in mathematical physics and in social anthropology—especially in the field of kinship. In this connection it is striking that Von Neumann's models are borrowed from the theory of games, a line of thought which was initiated independently by Kroeber when he compared social institutions "to the play of earnest children."⁵² There is, true enough, an important difference between games of entertainment and marriage rules: The former are constructed in such a way as to permit each player to extract from statistical regularities maximal differential values, while marriage rules, acting in the opposite direction, aim at establishing statistical regularities in spite of the differential values existing between individuals and generations. In this sense they constitute a special kind of "upturned game." Nevertheless, they can be treated with the same methods. Besides, such being the rules, each individual and group tries to play it in the "normal" way, that is, by maximizing his own advantage at the expense of the others (i.e., to get more wives, or better ones, whether from the esthetic, erotic, or economic point of view). The theory of courtship is thus a part of formal sociology. To those who are afraid that sociology might in this way get hopelessly involved in individual psychology, it will be enough to recall that Von Neumann has succeeded in giving a mathematical demonstration of the nature and strategy of a psychological technique as sophisticated as bluffing at the game of poker.⁵³

The next advantage of this increasing consolidation of social anthropology, economics, and linguistics into one great field, that of communication, is to make clear that they consist exclusively of the study of *rules* and have little concern with the nature of the partners (either individuals or groups) whose play is being patterned after these rules. As Von Neumann puts it, "The game is simply the totality of the rules which describe it."⁵⁴ Besides that of game, other operational notions are those of play, move, choice, and strategy.⁵⁵ But the nature of the players need not be considered. What is important is to find out when a given player can make a choice and when he cannot.

This outlook should open the study of kinship and marriage to approaches directly derived from the theory of communication. In the terminology of this theory it is possible to speak of the information of a marriage system by the number of choices at the observer's disposal to define the marriage status of an individual. Thus the information is unity for a dual exogamous system, and, in an Australian kind of kinship typology, it would increase with the logarithm of the number of matrimonial classes. A theoretical system where everybody could marry everybody would be a system with no redundancy, since each marriage choice would not be determined by previous choices, while the positive content of marriage rules constitutes the redundancy of the system under consideration. By studying the percentage of "free" choices in a matrimonial population (not absolutely free, but in relation to certain postulated conditions), it would thus become possible to offer numerical estimates of its entropy, both absolute and relative.

As a consequence, it would become possible to translate statistical models into mechanical ones and vice versa, thus bridging the gap still existing between population studies on the one hand and anthropological ones on the other, thereby laying a foundation for prediction and control. To give an example: In our own society the organization of marriage choices does not go beyond (1) the prohibition of close kin, (2) the size of the isolate, and (3) the accepted standard of behavior, which limits the frequency of certain choices within the isolate. With these data at hand, one could compute the information of the system, that is, translate our loosely organized and highly statistical marriage system into a mechanical model, thus making possible its comparison with the large series of marriage systems of a "mechanical" type available from simpler societies.

Similarly, a great deal of discussion has been carried on recently about the Murngin kinship system, which has been treated by different authors as a seven-class system, or less than seven, or four, or thirty-two, or three,⁵⁶ before recent research resolved the question in favor of the last number.⁵⁷

In the preceding pages an attempt has been made to assess the bearing of some recent lines of mathematical research upon an-