

The Raw and the Cooked **Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Hidden Structures of Myth**

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Claude Lévi-Strauss is one of the fathers of the Structuralist movement. As early as 1949 he exposed the unconscious structures defining and ordering kinship in social systems.¹ In the ensuing decade he continued to explore the codes shaping social realities in primitive societies, but in the early 1960s his object of research changed, as he shifted the focus of his studies from social to cultural systems.

Unlike sociologist Émile Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss held that it is not the social phenomenon that shapes the cultural and intellectual phenomenon, but vice versa – it is rather the intellectual categories that take part in shaping the social reality. Thus, since the early 1960s he endeavored to prove the precedence of the spiritual over the physical, the intellectual over the corporeal and social.

Introduction of human intelligence as an active universal force that shapes human reality, led Lévi-Strauss to publish a series of pivotal studies during the 1960s. 1962 witnessed the publication of *Totemism* and *The Savage Mind*² and two years later – the volume *The Raw and the Cooked*, which marked the beginning of a four-volume series published between 1964-1971, focusing on the structure and essence of savage mythology.³ In the introduction to the first volume, Lévi-Strauss undertakes to examine thought categories embedded in a set of myths extracted from native communities in Latin America. Among the categories to be explored he notes the raw and the cooked, the fresh and the decayed, the moistened and the burned. Through ethnographic observation he strives to fathom and define the intellectual laws unique to the community in question, laws which, per his estimation, are universal, namely – valid to any group, anywhere and anytime. In this essay I will examine Lévi-Strauss's attempt to reconstruct the logical structure underlying food and cooking myths.

The Savage Mind, Myths and Binary Structures

Lévi-Strauss's basic assumption is that the knowledge about the real world is not constructed in a pure empirical manner; to wit – the researcher is not a passive factor whose sole function is to expose reality and its physical and conceptual qualities, and duplicate them as they are. The researcher takes an active part in the process of knowledge constitution; he is equipped with glasses of sorts, with a type of conceptual skeleton through which he defines the boundaries of the observed phenomenon and applies a grid of categories whereby he deconstructs and examines it. The resulting knowledge is thus the outcome of an encounter between the researcher's cognitive classification structure and the observed phenomenal world. Lévi-Strauss does not reject the very existence of a physical world, with immanent structure and organization, as such, yet he maintains that man cannot have access to this reality; he cannot comprehend it without the mediation of the cognitive structure, which is timeless and universal. According to Lévi-Strauss, the defining and classifying view is shared by both Western scientific thought and the savage mind.

As opposed to the anthropological approach, which perceives the savage mind as motivated by necessity and instinct, Lévi-Strauss believes that it is an intellectual thought pattern which endeavors to put the world in order via a procedure of observation and classification. Unlike scientific thought which deconstructs reality, however, the savage mind is holistic; it seeks ways to understand all types of nature, and contains fields which science deems nonresearchable, fields pertaining to faith, magic, imagination, and subjective experience. To this end, the savage mind employs the existent. It is a type of bricolage, improvisation based on available materials and tools.⁴

One of the major ways in which the savage mind construes and analyzes reality is via myth. Myth is an allegory intended to account for the origin of human institutions, yet, according to Lévi-Strauss, behind the allegorical myth lies profound abstract thought. The collection of myths which Lévi-Strauss explored appears ostensibly strange, diversified and incoherent. Anything can happen in them: people have sexual intercourse with birds, the protagonists ascend to the heavens, fish smoke a pipe, animals speak and behave like humans. But

beyond the strangeness, the myth's different versions intertwine to form a single system based on a common structure, for beyond the surface level, myth contains, at the deep level, a conflict between polarized values, and the myth story is supposed to reconcile the conflict.

Lévi-Strauss holds that the structure consisting of a pair of dialectic notions is universal and timeless. It lies in our consciousness, through which it is projected onto an array of texts – myths that describe and explain the world; it is a universal structure which Lévi-Strauss calls a "binary structure."⁵ The story of Creation in Genesis 1 is an example of a myth which explains the world by means of binary categories. Darkness is separated from light; the heavens separate from the air; the land is split into categories: earth and water; the water is divided into sea water and rain water, namely maleficent and beneficent water. At this point a second level of meaning constitution is revealed. In fact, in the first stage we examine categories of phenomena found in nature: darkness/light, land/sea, man/woman. In the second stage the natural categories serve as a basis for explanation of more general and abstract categories. Thus, the natural categories sea water/rain water provide the basis for explanation of cultural categories: maleficent/beneficent. Lévi-Strauss calls this type of thinking "the logic of the concrete."

Alongside the binary categories, which are based on a dichotomous array of two notions, there are also anomalous categories, namely conceptual categories that contain elements from both poles. Thus, for example, vis-à-vis the binary pair man/god there is the anomalous category of the angel, which possesses qualities of both man and god. The anomalous categories are typified by a surplus of meaning, they are more intricate and possess a higher semiotic power; therefore they endanger the binary basis of the meaning constituting categories of a given culture. Thus, every culture tries to control these categories by defining them as "taboo" or "sacred" categories. At times, the anomalous category functions as a link between two poles perceived as scary and dangerous: thus, for example, the figure of Christ is an anomalous category of sanctity, linking the earthly and the heavenly, just as the figure of the vampire links the living with the dead.⁶

On the Profound Meaning of Cooking Myths

One of the basic binary pairs explored by Lévi-Strauss is nature/culture. While nature is perceived as emotional-instinctual, culture is perceived as intellectual. But beyond the customary difference, culture is differentiated from nature, according to Lévi-Strauss, since it has rules and laws which dictate what is right and what is wrong. Therefore they also take part in the creation of social order. The question is where nature ends and culture begins. This is where myth comes in, serving as a vehicle for explanation and mediation.

In his 1964 book *The Raw and the Cooked* Lévi-Strauss explored nature/culture relations on the culinary level – namely, the way in which myth describes and explains the evolution of cooking techniques and rules, and the transformation of cooking into a cultural process – through the study of myth. The act of cooking is perceived by Lévi-Strauss as a type of anomalous category since food constantly crosses the boundaries of the categories nature and culture. Thus the cook is a type of cultural agent who links the raw product with the human consumer. His role is to ensure that the natural becomes cooked and undergoes a process of socialization. The analysis of myths pertaining to food and cooking is based on three premises: 1. Cooking is a language, and like any language, it has an unconscious structure constituted by binary oppositions; 2. Cooking is structured by the culinary triangle: raw/cooked/rotten – a triad which involves a double opposition between nature/culture and elaborated/unelaborated; 3. In practice, this abstract triangle becomes filled with several oppositional pairs, such as roasted/boiled, which corresponds to the pair raw/rotten.

Lévi-Strauss maintains that culinary rites are not inborn but rather acquired phenomena. The animal in nature eats whatever its instinct perceives as edible, but in the case of human beings, it is social convention that determines what is food and what is not food, what type of food we shall eat and on what occasion. The human stomach can digest practically anything, so that the distinction edible/inedible is founded on a cultural rather than a physical basis. World cuisine is typified by a vast range of edible/inedible phenomena, which vary from place to place and from one period to another. At the same time, at the deep level of the binary structure, Lévi-Strauss sees no significant difference between the shopping list of a European

man and the inventory of edible stuffs of a Native American from the Amazonas. Both divide the uniform category of food into subcategories 1, 2, and 3. Each type of food is treated differently, but the sum total of categories is similar to those formulated by Lévi-Strauss.

The category of the raw forms the basis for two elementary levels: cooked food, which is the cultural transformation of the raw; and rotten food which is its natural transformation. This is the basic triangle, in relation to which intermediary states emerge, such as cooking in water or in air. Cooking associated with air leads to roasting or smoking, whereas the use of water entails boiling. Both categories derive from cooking, namely from culture, but the roasted leaves the inner part of the meat relatively raw and it can be cooked directly on an open flame, thus it remains closer to the nature pole, whereas the boiled, which undergoes full cooking, is closer to the side of culture.

Each category is ascribed a different level of social prestige. Some of the food is exclusively suitable to men, some to women; some is forbidden to children, some can be eaten only on holidays, and some is forbidden to members of different religious groups. Lévi-Strauss maintains that there is a reverse relation between the levels of cultural transformation and the social value attributed to various types of cooking. Thus, boiled food represents a more developed state (use of water and oil) and more refined values than roasted food. Ostensibly, the boiled/roasted relations correspond with the advanced/primitive relations, but these can also switch, for boiled food is associated with endo-cuisine, with the intrinsic, intimate sphere. It is identified with a family cuisine (dishes such as *cholent* or stew), that of the wife and mother. The roasted, on the other hand, is identified with exo-cuisine, with public celebrations taking place in the public sphere, outdoors, and is associated with the masculine world. Hence, the roasted will be closer to culture and prestige, whereas the boiled will be associated with a more inferior culture, with the category of the decayed, due to the use of water and the blending of various elements in the dish (vegetables, meat, etc.). The opposition roasted/boiled remains stable, but the values associated with each notion may change or switch. In fact, the hierarchical position of the boiled/roasted/rotten food is connected with the principle of maximum/minimum cooking. The less the food is transformed, the higher its social status. Roasted food is considered more aristocratic than boiled food since its transformation involves only fire, as opposed to boiled food where both water and oil are used. Food that has rotted (e.g. Roquefort cheese) involves even lesser human intervention, and is therefore considered of higher quality. Similarly, raw fish (sushi) is considered highly prestigious. Things might get even more complicated if we add further categories, such as smoked, fried, dried, pickled, steamed, baked, pressure cooked. This set of notions can be set in relations of opposition, complementation, and symmetry.

Thus, within the kitchen system transpires a set of binary pairs: nature/culture, duration/immediacy, near/far. To these one should add various cooking durations, resulting in countless combinations taking part in the creation of a code which forms a sequence of sorts and underlies the definition of processes pertaining to the creation of cultural order and social hierarchy.

Notes

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, tr. James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer (Boston: Beacon, 1969).
2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, tr. George Weidenfeld and Nicolson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, tr. Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).
3. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques*, vols. 1-4: vol. I: *The Raw and the Cooked*, tr. John and Doreen Weightman (London: J. Cape, 1969); vol. II: *From Honey to Ashes*, tr. John and Doreen Weightman (London: Cape, 1973); vol. III: *The Origin of Table Manners*, tr. John and Doreen Weightman (London: Cape, 1978); vol. IV: *The Naked Man*, tr. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
4. Frédéric Keck, *Lévi-Strauss et la pensée sauvage* (Paris: PUF, 2004), pp. 38-62.
5. Catherine Backès-Clément, *Lévi-Strauss* (Paris: Seghers, 1970), pp. 111-140.
6. Marcel Hénaff, *Claude Lévi-Strauss et l'anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Pocket, 1991), pp. 220-259.

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