On Levi-Strauss' Structuralism

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It is easy to agree with Claude Lévi-Strauss that "the fundamental pattern of human thought … uses binary contrasts such as black-white, night-day, and hot-cold" (McGee &Warms). But in fact, Hegelianism, and Marxism much more so, in their analysis of problems, went further into the dialectical relationships of opposites, seeing in them struggles that led to transformations. Lévi-Strauss deals merely with those opposites that lie in perpetual stasis with each other, not leading to transformations of any kind.

When Lévi-Strauss takes his notion of binary structure of human thought into human society, however, one begins to wonder how he could have arrived at his conclusions. First, in taking Mauss' concept of reciprocity and applying it to marriage and relationships within primitive societies, he assumed that "women are a commodity that could be exchanged." Where did he get that? What stage of society was he referring to? Or did he have any concept of stages at all? The argument is highly questionable and may reveal more of his prejudices and biases as a French male anthropologist than the wealth of his anthropological research.

Beyond his positing of binary contrasts, his whole structural framework seems faulty to me. Is it "a fundamental characteristic of human thought … to find a midpoint between oppositions"? What was his basis for this contention? Between night and day, does the human mind perpetually seek noon and midnight? He is usually asleep at midnight and keeps out of the harsh noontime sun. Between black and white, he prefers gray? Between hot and cold, he would rather have his drinks tepid? His baths warm, perhaps, but not his drink, I presume. And certainly, between man and woman, mankind as a general rule has not preferred the middle gender.

This is of course already in ridicule of Lévi-Strauss' midpoint assumption. He may have meant something else, though I could not tell what it is from the two articles alone that I have read. I can only surmise that this is part of his static structural view of humankind and his society.

It is also all very well treat kinship terms as elements of speech, and therefore to glean from them the culture of a society. But I am afraid I cannot agree at all with Lévi-Strauss' conclusions about the avunculate, or about the four Winnebago myths, primarily because his whole framework starts from a wrong assumption about the fundamental role of women. The conclusion that comes to my own mind then is that Lévi-Strauss has mirrored not culture or even cultures as they vaguely seem to be, but just his own mind, reading into culture and society what he chooses to see rather than what is there.

It would take another mind, less strung up on the ideational plane and more grounded on material reality, to unravel the language of kinship in cultures, as well as culture. In the meantime, Lévi-Strauss may have made his significant contribution in the most general sense of providing a framework from which to proceed in the study of kinship structures.