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Perhaps more than any other thinker available to us, Claude Lévi-Strauss pursued a sustained inquiry into the distinctive capacities and propensities of human beings on the basis of the anthropological principle that all cases of humanity count, no matter how "other" they may be or may appear to be. Again and again in his work, Lévi-Strauss refused both the exclusion of difference from humanness and, what is equivalent to such exclusion, the decomposition of humanity into peoples who are accorded a universal status and others who are reduced to the status of side-show curiosities, whether labeled as "exotic," "archaic," or "deviant." Such a decomposition of humanity, Lévi-Strauss taught us, normalizes the thought and habits of the privileged ("the normal, white, adult man") and, at same time, impoverishes our understanding of humanness.[1]

But what then did Lévi-Strauss learn from this sustained inquiry into humankind, carried out on this robustly anthropological basis? First and foremost, just this: *human beings never leave well enough alone.*

Humans, in other words, take what would happen either by chance or by necessity (the two manifestations of nature) and then replace the former, and supplement the latter, with some pattern or order, doing so always on the basis of a crafted or fabricated *rule*. Such rules are, at once, dramatically weaker than the laws of nature, in that they lack determinative power, and also dramatically richer, in that they create meanings, with the result that we, as humans, live—to borrow Clifford Geertz's phrasing—"in webs of significance" of our own

making.[2] Drawing on Lévi-Strauss, we can add that another aspect, or manifestation, of the universal human propensity to "never leave well enough alone" is that humans are not content to leave each other alone; instead, they persistently pull each other into social life, not as a means to some practical end, but for the sake of sociality itself, even as they find it intermittently noisome.[3] Put otherwise, along with—or rather as one component of—creating meanings, the fabricated rules constitute humans as social beings.

Eating is, of course, a prime example of these Lévi-Straussian points. Let us note, to begin with, that what humans do not do is take sources of calories and nutrients simply as they are given by nature. For humans in all contexts, across time and space, food proper is always in some way altered or "cooked," using this latter term in the broadest of senses. Such "cooking" may involve broiling, boiling, fermenting, curing, pickling, or even just "plating" (to use the recently popular term of the culinary arts), but regardless of this variety, it always involves alteration to what is otherwise given or found—and the alteration is always organized by a fabricated rule or rules. As Lévi-Strauss taught us, this specific combination of universality and variety is precisely analogous to the situation of language: human languages vary greatly, but language per se is a universal in human existence. Cooking and language are, for Lévi-Strauss, two of the ordered arrangements that humans add to the world.

Furthermore, though the rules of "cooking" vary greatly—to the point that the cooking of one community may be disgusting, or even unrecognizable, to another—in no case of human ingestion is there an absence of such rules.[4] To best see the truth of this view, we can try to imagine scenarios of human ingestion that approach a zero-degree of "cooking" or food preparation. Under some circumstances, for example, a person might kill an edible and

nutritious animal and then—like any non-human carnivore—proceed to eat the animal's flesh without any preparation or alteration beyond the hacking and ripping that is needed to get it into the digestive track and obtain its nutrients. But precisely because humans always produce, and always live with, some rules or standards of alteration—of "cooking," in Lévi-Strauss's extended sense—this act of ingestion would never be merely, or unmarked, "eating," as it would be for a non-human animal; rather, it would always have a specific meaning, or specific meanings—whether signifying "desperate hunger," a commitment to a "paleo diet," or—as a piece of performance art, perhaps—a "shocking exploration of our animality."[5]

That "cooking" is never absent from human ingestion is also the case with the much less dramatic act of eating what, by convention, we call "raw fruit." The very fact of waiting for a particular peak of ripeness, which is both a commonplace and something that varies across cultures, involves a departure from a natural behavior and an alteration—that is, an act of "cooking," in Lévi-Strauss's extended sense—of the fruit we eat. Consider, for instance, all of the work that must be done—whether by applying pesticides or by some more "natural" (though genuinely more sustainable) means—in order to keep other animals, unburdened by any such fabricated rules, from eating the fruit we desire before it "ripens." In this regard, one thinks of Ralph Waldo Emerson's precise—but thoroughly cultural—assertion that "there are only ten minutes in the life of a pear when it is perfect to eat." This Emersonian view of pears has, let us note, been taken-up in our own historical moment by that pre-eminent advocate of "natural" foods, Michael Pollan, who adds: "in the case of a peach, that window is probably closer to seven minutes, and in the case of raspberries, maybe five."[6]

Let us note that Emerson's and Pollan's proudly narrow standards of fruit ripeness mean both (i) that our seemingly "raw fruits" are "cooked" before we eat them and (ii) that humans diverge from an "optimal foraging strategy" in relation to fruits.[7] Without question, selective pressures have produced other species that bite or gnaw the fruits we desire both earlier in, and over a much wider span of, the time that those fruits hang on trees. Thus here, in the practice of valorizing ripeness, we find a precise parallel to the effects of "the dichotomy of cousins"—that is, to the effects of the differentiation between cross-cousins and parallel-cousins[8]—as Levi-Strauss recognized and theorized that dichotimization. Put simply, just as the differentiation of fruits based on the Emersonian ideal of ripeness precludes the optimized foraging of fruits, in any objective biological sense, so too, the dichotimization of cousins diverges from the sociobiological imperative of maximizing "genetic fitness."[9] What is key is that this division of cousins treats the categories of cousins as opposites—typically as idealized and prohibited partners for reproductive unions respectively—even though the categories of cousins possess the exact same "coefficient of relatedness" in relation to ego.[10] By contrast, the sociobiological imperative—which appears to be well documented for other animals—provides no basis for an organism to treat as different other individuals of the species, if the genetic relatedness of the organism to those individuals is the same, as it is with cousins whether they are cross- or parallel-.

Food, of course, also illustrates the social manifestation, or dimension, of *never leaving well enough alone*. Universally—if always according to particular cultural schemes—food is used by people to pull others into sociality.[11] In this regard, the crucial passage in Lévi-Strauss's oeuvres is his discussion, in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, of the exchange of identical

glasses of “modest” wine by patrons of “lower-priced restaurants in the south of France.” Seated close to one another, the patrons—who have entered the restaurant as strangers—feel an inchoate discomfort as long as they avoid any signs of recognition of each other. In response to the discomfort, a glass of wine is offered—that is, it is poured by one patron for his neighbor—and from that point, “the relationship can only be cordial or hostile.” Moreover, if the offer of wine is reciprocated—if cordiality rather than hostility is chosen—then the reciprocation “sanctions another offer, for conversation.” In this manner, Lévi-Strauss writes, “a whole range of trivial social ties are established by a series of alternating oscillations, in which offering gives one a right, and receiving makes one obligated, and always beyond what has been given or accepted.”[12]

Let us note, moreover, that the very pattern, or structure, Lévi-Strauss finds in the process of making sociality is what, in his later works, he shows us to be operating in all manners of cultural production.[13] The process begins with a conceptual opposition (in the parable of wine-pouring, it is the discomfiting opposition between the self and someone recognized as other), and this opposition is then engaged through an act of mediation (the pouring of a glass of wine); very importantly, though, the act of mediation does not bring closure. The act of mediation leads, rather, to something “beyond what has been given and accepted”; it leads, in short, to an open-ended series of variants on the theme—whether to another exchange, another myth, or another musical passage.[14]

As a measure of Lévi-Strauss’s achievement—and ultimately of his faithfulness to humankind—let us recognize that in providing this ethnographic parable of the origins of social life, Lévi-Strauss radically displaces the “comparative method” of social evolutionary theory.[15]

In Lévi-Strauss's example of a cheap restaurant in the south of France, the origins of sociality are located in, and illustrated by, a recurring experience found in Lévi-Strauss's own world. Exotic, tribal others are not made to play "the primitive"; the very decomposition of humanity is thus resisted.

Endnotes

[1] The quotation in parentheses is from the opening pages of *Le totémisme aujourd'hui*. Lévi-Strauss writes: "Pour maintenir dans leur intégrité et fonder du meme coup les modes de pensée de l'homme normal, blanc , et adulte, rien ne pouvait donc être plus commode que de rassembler en dehors de lui des coutumes et des croyances…autour desquelles viendraient se cristalliser, en une masse inerte, des idées qui eussent été moins inoffensives, s'il avait fallu reconnaître leur presence et leur activité dans toutes les civilisations, y compris la nôtre" (pp. 7-8). In analyzing Orientalism, rather than totemism, Edward Said echoes this passage, whether knowingly or not, when he writes: Can one divide human reality…into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly" (Orientalism, 1978: 45).

[2] Geertz is here discussing that other master, Max Weber; the source is "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), p. 5.

[3] For Lévi-Strauss's ambivalence about social life, and for his own belief that this ambivalence is widespread among humans, see the final chapter, the final paragraph, and most importantly, the final sentence of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969[1949]): "At either end of the earth and at both extremes of time, the Sumerian myth of a golden age and the Andaman myth of a future life correspond, the former placing the end of primitive happiness at a time when the confusion of languages made words into common property, the latter describing the bliss of the hereafter as a heaven where women will no longer be exchanged, i.e., removing to an equally unattainable past or future the joys, eternally denied to social man, of a world in which one might *keep to oneself*."

For Lévi-Strauss's recognition that sociality and social institutions are not a means to an end, but are their own ends is present in comments such as this one, also from *Elementary Structures:* "the function of dual organization is solely to produce those consequences which it actually does produce" (141).

[4] That other modes of cooking can be unrecognizable (or unintelligible) is illustrated by the mis-perception the United States and Europe, prior to the recent global fad for sushi and sashimi, that the Japanese were eaters of raw fish.

[5] On the pursuit of a "paleo diet," and "lifestyle," see "The New Age Cavemen and the City," *The New York Times*, 8 January 2010. While it seems possible to imagine some performance artist killing and then eating a raw animal in front of an audience, at least one video art installation suggests that this may in fact be a particularly difficult threshold to cross—even for a genre tradition that has, in recent years, given us public defecations. For her 2008 video installation, "Primate Cinema: How to Act Like Animal," for example, Rachel Myeri recruited a troupe of humans to restage six minutes of the recorded movements and interactions of non-human primates. But when it came to hunting and ingestion, the humans used a stuffed animal and

feigned ingestion. Though the video installation was presented as a brief for the likeness of humans and other primates, the juxtaposition of video of baboons ripping into a recently killed small mammal and video of humans tearing apart a child's toy might seemed instead to undermine this avowed point. For more on Myeri's "Primate Cinema," see www.soft-science.org/primate.html .

[6] I heard both the Emerson and the Michael Pollan quotations read by Alice Waters, speaking on 9 November 2010 at Scripps College, in an event titled, "An Evening with Alice Waters." Pollan is one of the most recognizable public intellectuals in the U.S. today, and the author of, among other works, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2007), *In Defense of Food* (2008), and *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual* (2009). Alice Waters is the founder of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California and the Vice President of Slow Food International. Between 2007 and 2009, Ms. Waters revamped the dining service at the American Academy of Rome. For a sense of the historical context in which Emerson wrote about pears, see pp. 68-69 of Philip J. Pauly's Fruits and Plains: the Horticultural Transformation of America (2007).

[7] For an introduction to optimal foraging theory, see MacArthur, R. H. and Pianka, E. R. (1966). "On the Optimal Use of a Patchy Environment," American Naturalist, 100.

[8] The anthropological term "cross-cousin" refers to either a person's mother's brother's child or that same person's father's sister's child; the "crossing" is in the gender of the person's parent and the parent's sibling. In like manner, "parallel cousin" refers to either a person's mothe's sister's child or the same person's father's brother's child. The phrase "dichotomy of cousins" appears on page 131 of *Elementary Structures* (in Chapter IX).

[9] On the sociobiological imperative of maximizing "genetic fitness," see, of course, E.O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975).

[10] For extended demonstrations of the ways numerous human rules of sexual unioning demonstrate the inapplicability of sociobiology to humankind, see Marshall Sahlins, The Use and Abuse of Biology: An Anthropological Critique of Sociobiology (1976) and Susan McKinnon, Neoliberal Genetics: The Myths and Moral Tales of Evolutionary Psychology (2006). For an important demonstration that the valences of cross-cousins and parallel-cousins have a contingency not registered in Lévi-Strauss's own work, see James Boon, "The Meaning of Marriage and Descent," chapter 6 in The Anthropological Romance of Bali, 1597-1972 (1977).

[11] For a particularly good ethnographic account and analysis of a case of this, see the section, "The Power of Food," pp. 68-74 in Sherry Ortner's Sherpas through Their Rituals (1977).

[12] See pp. 62-63 of Elementary Structures.

[13] See Lévi-Strauss's four-volume study, Mythologiques.

[14] On Lévi-Strauss and music, see both James Boon (1989), "Lévi-Strauss, Wagner, Romanticism: A Reading-back," in George Stocking, ed. Romantic Motives (History of Anthropology, Vol. 6). University of Wisconsin, and Robert Launay, "Myth and Music: the Musical Epigraphs to The Raw and the Cooked," paper presented at the 2010 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, in New Orleans, LA, on 19 November 2010.

[15] On the "comparative method" distinctive of social evolutionary anthropology, see George Stocking, Victorian Anthropology (1987), pp. 167-168 and 174-175, and Daniel Segal, "'Western Civ' and the Staging of History in American Higher Education," American Historical Review, 2000, vol. 105(3): pp. 770-805.