

The Legacy of Structuralism: An Interview with Paul-François Tremlett

I interviewed Paul-François Tremlett in early 2012, hoping to draw out some of the links between his 2008 book *Lévi-Strauss on Religion: The Structuring Mind* (Equinox Publishing) and the relevance of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss for the contemporary study of religion. The conversation that followed ranged over Lévi-Strauss's connections to theory and method in the study of religion and cognitive science of religion, the relationships between structuralism and politics, gender, and post-structuralism, and Lévi-Strauss's legacy for the field of religious studies today.

Donovan Schaefer: Out of all the thinkers you work on, how did you come to write a book about Claude Lévi-Strauss and religion?

Paul-François Tremlett: I'm interested in social theory generally and sociological and anthropological theories of religion more specifically, so when the opportunity came to write the book I jumped at it. I could hardly call myself a structuralist or a disciple of Lévi-Strauss but, nevertheless, his work has always fascinated me.

DOS: You point out early in the book that Lévi-Strauss is a figure rarely brought into theoretical conversations in Religious Studies. It occurred to me that even though—as an undergrad—I had read anthropologists and many theorists who are interesting primarily for their role in the history of our scholarly categories but are far from fashionable today, Lévi-Strauss was missing. Why is it that scholars in religion generally aren't interested in Lévi-Strauss?

PFT: I encountered Lévi-Strauss as an undergraduate studying theory in anthropology, but I had also specialized in Southeast Asia and structuralism was pretty influential, in the 1960s and 1970s, in ethnographies of the region. However, it is by and large correct to say—with one or two notable exceptions such as Hans Penner and Seth Kunin—that Lévi-Strauss' *oeuvre* is missing from sustained reflection by scholars in Religious Studies. I can think of a number of introductions to theory in RS which either miss it out completely or deal with it in cursory and even misleading fashion. I don't want to speculate on why, but it is certainly a problem. In my view, structuralism provides a critical window onto the social theory of the twentieth century—I could hardly overstate its importance. Leaving aside Saussure and Jakobson and the linguistic turn more generally, if one doesn't know Lévi-Strauss what does one make of Derrida, Lacan, Althusser, Foucault, Freud, Bourdieu, let alone the complex legacies of anthropology? Moreover, Lévi-Strauss was not some narrow specialist; his writings engage a vast range of sources from Malinowski to Norbert Wiener's work in cybernetics and information theory. A sound grounding in theory is, I would say, impossible without some familiarity with Lévi-Strauss' work.

DOS: In the final chapter of this book you lay out a systematic comparison between what you call the “phenomenology of religion” and “structuralism” as an approach to religion. You write that the differences are subtle and have something to do with the roles of the scholar—her prerogative and the foundation of her authority—implicit in each. I'm interested in the similarities and differences between what gets called structuralism (and I'm including the anthropologists Victor Turner and Mary Douglas here) in the US and the Perennialist school, within which I include Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, Huston Smith, and Karen Armstrong. How would you mark the similarities and differences between these different lineages?

PFT: Phenomenology in RS has come in for a lot of stick in recent years, including from me. However, the point I wanted to make at the end of *Lévi-Strauss on Religion* was that the critique of phenomenology as not being scientific enough or as being some kind of theology in disguise misses the point (see Fitzgerald 2000; Flood 1999; McCutcheon 1997; Segal 1989). The methodological appeals made by phenomenology are entirely in keeping with the traditions of the human sciences and humanities: delineating a clear class of facts for analysis (the *sui generis* move), securing the objectivity of the analyst *vis-à-vis* that class of facts (the

claim to *epoché*) and, at the same time, guaranteeing the privileged access of the analyst to those facts (*verstehen*). There is nothing anti-scientific or theological about these appeals. However, involved with these are other appeals—in the case of Eliade we might delineate them as ‘romantic’—and the problem lies in trying to figure out the relationships between these different kinds of appeal. Whether we are interested in structuralism or phenomenology, it is vital that we analyze their respective claims to legitimacy and situate them historically so that we can follow the traditions and conversations that they have set in motion.

DOS: *The book is subtitled “The Structuring Mind” and your own more recent work has started to look more at the cognitive science of religion. Do you recognize that link? Is there anything in Lévi-Strauss's work—or the structuralist tradition more generally—that could be put into conversation with contemporary research in cognitive science and religion?*

PFT: The sub-title *The Structuring Mind* was meant, in a sense, to capture Lévi-Strauss’ debt to Kant. For both, the mind played a constitutive role in how human beings apprehend and engage with the world. Since writing the book I have been thinking about cognitive approaches to religion—from Tylor and Lévy-Bruhl to Lévi-Strauss and Boyer, but also people like Varela and Ingold—and this has fed into my teaching but also led me to start thinking about whether and to what end Lévi-Strauss’ work might be brought into conversation with contemporary cognitive theory. I think Lévi-Strauss’ work—his engagements with linguistics, anthropology, philosophy and cybernetics—offers a useful point of orientation in debates about cognitive theory and the anthropology of religion. Indeed, I would argue that Lévi-Strauss’ cognitivism is far more nuanced and subtle than that of Pascal Boyer for example, who seems to begin from the premise that religion is irrational and the mind is a fixed device.

DOS: *The book helped me understand Lévi-Strauss' political agenda (such as changing the name of his chaired professorship from the “Study of Religions of Non-Civilized People” to “Comparative Religion of Peoples Without Writing”) as well as aspects of his context that situate his work politically (for instance, your discussion on page 75 of the meaning of the French word sauvage and how the full spectrum of its associations in French is erased when translated into the pejorative English word “savage”). You also write that Lévi-Strauss was a member of the Socialist Party as a young man but would later denounce the May 1968 demonstrations in France. How do you think Lévi-Strauss viewed himself politically? Did he see his scholarship as political labor and if so, in what political directions was he pushing?*

PFT: When reading *Tristes Tropiques* one is struck by Lévi-Strauss’ empathy and anger for the horror that the West has visited on the peoples it colonized. The passions of *Tristes Tropiques* are absent in his more strictly academic writings. But in the essays ‘Race and History’ and ‘Race and Culture’ some of the issues that Lévi-Strauss broaches in *Tristes Tropiques* are refracted through theoretical models that seem to divest the analysis of any agonistic politics. I found Lévi-Strauss frustrating on this score, but I would be a poor inheritor of the structuralist legacy if I agreed to your invitation and began to impute psychological states or intentions to Lévi-Strauss!

DOS: *I really liked your nuanced discussion of Jacques Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss in Chapter 6 (“The Structure of Nostalgia”)—pointing out both its direct hits and its misses. I've read that critique so many times but I feel like the book helped me appreciate it in a new light. Could you say more, though, about an earlier passage, where you write, “Derrida's critiques of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss suggested not a post- or anti-structuralism but perhaps instead a revitalized and expanded one, inspired by Nietzsche.” (p. 24). What do you mean by this? Of course it's a truism that the prefix post- is always an inclusion as well as a passage beyond, but how, specifically, do you see this working in Derrida's critique?*

PFT: Derrida’s work is all about the ruses and duplicities of meaning—we might note a debt to Freud’s work on dreams, jokes and slips of the tongue—and about the fact that texts contain or convey only the illusion of authorial intention and, as such, are constantly un-done by the “play” of meanings that language always sets in motion. For Derrida the metaphysics of presence is the central delusion of the Western

philosophical tradition, and there is a sense of tragedy that emerges from this condition, a sense that we are condemned to misunderstand, to fail in our quest for intimacy. I think the tragedy that Derrida's critique of presence points to has powerful Nietzschean (and Judaeo-Christian) undertones, and that sense of tragedy is also played out in Derrida's critique of *Tristes Tropiques* where Lévi-Strauss was reflecting on his time with the Nambikwara. In short, Derrida makes sense for me as a post-Freudian and post-Nietzschean thinker. The post-structuralist moniker is another way in for reading Derrida—namely through Saussure's idea of difference which Derrida seizes on and pushes to its limit.

DOS: *I loved your line that Lévi-Strauss in The Elementary Structures of Kinship "[wants] not just to eat his cake but indeed to take possession of the entire bakery." This is a criticism that is often leveled, justly or unjustly, against "theory." Is Lévi-Strauss part of the transformation of theory over the course of the 20th century—its possible scope, its "inspired audacity," as you call it?*

PFT: Structuralism was a big deal—it promised a lot and generated a great deal of excitement. I think Lévi-Strauss and structuralism are hugely important to developments in theory in the twentieth century. As I said before, I cannot overstate their importance. Perhaps the biggest irony is that the anthropologists will likely be the last ones to return to Lévi-Strauss because of the indelible association of structuralist ethnography with a complete absence of historical sense. And of course it is always, in retrospect, easy to criticize the excesses of theory. But those excesses are necessary. They are part of the process of building theory, of formulating hypotheses and of developing narratives. That is where our objectivity, in the human sciences, comes from—from the objections and from the conversations that goods idea put in play.

DOS: *Going back to the question of Lévi-Strauss' adoption in religious studies: in my corners of the field there seems to be a lot more discussion of Mauss than of Lévi-Strauss. Does this match your experience?*

PFT: Lévi-Strauss was a significant part of my training in anthropology. However, except for *The Gift* I never read Mauss until much later, after I started reading Bourdieu and decided to excavate the notion of 'habitus'.

DOS: *You seem to suggest on page 32 that Lévi-Strauss misreads Mauss. How do you see that misreading unfolding? And do you see it as a strong misreading that productively appropriates Mauss' work, or a mistake that weakens Lévi-Strauss' project?*

PFT: I wasn't suggesting that Lévi-Strauss had misread Mauss; Mauss' work on reciprocity is obviously central to *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. However, whereas for Mauss the analysis of reciprocity is at the same time a critique of capitalist modernity, with Lévi-Strauss it becomes a question that will be solved mathematically through the generation of models.

DOS: *Especially in the section on kinship, you write a lot about Lévi-Strauss' approach to gender, how at least in his early works women occupied a structural role in exchange between societies, making other forms of exchange possible. In the hope of eliciting a nuanced answer from you with a simple question: Is Lévi-Strauss sexist?*

PFT: I think one needs to locate Lévi-Strauss' analysis of kinship in European philosophical and political discourses about the origins of the social rather than as a strictly scientific analysis of exchange. This includes of course Hobbes, Rousseau, Freud and many others. Gender is one critical lens that we can use to re-read this material.

DOS: *In the last line of the book you write that our response as post-moderns to Lévi-Strauss can only be a "wry smile." What do you think was the most important legacy that Lévi-Strauss left for us?*

PFT: The fact is Lévi-Strauss' writings and structuralism in general created huge intellectual excitement—the sort of buzz and the kind of hope that, in retrospect, seems naïve. Structuralism seemed, if only fleetingly, to offer the chance to establish the human sciences *as sciences*, in a fashion not dissimilar to the kinds of claims that are being made today about neo-Darwinian theory. But beyond that utopian false dawn, it spawned a genuine inter-disciplinarity not just between anthropology and linguistics but feeding into Marxism, history, literary analysis, psychoanalysis, music, cognitive theory, cybernetics and information theory...The list could go on. I think it's a remarkable legacy. Scholarship today seems to push us into narrower and narrower specialisms, closing down the kinds of conversations and critical collaborations that genuinely add to knowledge and understanding. Lévi-Strauss was thoroughly engaged in his time and that kind of engagement is sorely lacking today.

DOS: Do you use Lévi-Strauss in your own work?

PFT: I'm not sure that it is possible to deny that one is, at some level, a structuralist today. As I've already indicated, since writing the book I have been thinking a lot about the relationships between his work and that of contemporary debates in cognitivist circles. There is also an interesting article by Boris Wiseman on a sort of sensorium of Lévi-Strauss which I think may have some applications in research I'm currently engaged in exploring how different environmental contexts (forests, slums and gated communities in the Philippines) spark different bodily and cognitive capacities for well-being.

DOS: How important do you think it is for undergraduates and graduate students to be reading Lévi-Strauss? Should he be included in the canon that we use to train future scholars of religion? And if so, can he be more than a link in a genealogical chain, the series of intellectual moments that have led us to our present scholarly landscape of complexity and conceptual pluralism?

PFT: I think it's vital that RS undergraduate students read Lévi-Strauss as part of their training. But it's essential that students are able to get their teeth into social theory in general and to trace the traditions, genealogies and lineages that have constituted the study of religions. The study of religions is really just one part of a much bigger conversation that includes political science, sociology, philosophy and anthropology which has sought to understand and explain the varied mechanisms through which we are able to establish durable connections with one another. Religion is just one mode of producing such connections. Studying Lévi-Strauss is one excellent pathway into that conversation.

DOS: And finally: If you're willing to speculate, what do you think Lévi-Strauss would have thought of the movie Avatar?