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A Letter to E. E. Evans-Pritchard

Author(s): L. Lévy-Bruhl

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# A Letter to E. E. Evans-Pritchard

L. LÉVY-BRUHL

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IN 1934 I published a paper, "Lévy-Bruhl's theory of Primitive Mentality", in the *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts* of the Egyptian University. I sent a copy of the article to Lévy-Bruhl, whom I had met previously, and I received from him a letter which I now publish for several reasons. Firstly, because it is in itself of value for students of Lévy-Bruhl's writings. Some of those who have read my article may have wondered what Lévy-Bruhl would have said in reply to my exposition and criticism of his theory. Secondly, because it is interesting to know that he was turning over in his mind in 1934 some of the reformulations of his theory which appear in the posthumous *Carnets*. Thirdly, because it shows Lévy-Bruhl to have been as great a man as he was a scholar—tolerant, open-minded, and courteous. His letter is a model for any senior scholar replying to criticisms of his views by an inferior in years, knowledge, and ability. My explanatory comments are in square brackets. Words in italics are those underlined, and phrases in single quotation marks are those in English in Lévy-Bruhl's letter.

The letter was translated by Mr. Donald G. MacRae.

E. E. E.-P.

*Paris, 14th November, 1934. 7, Rue Lincoln.*

Dear Colleague—and if you will allow me to add—friend, allow me to write in French, in order to save time. 'I know that it is quite safe to do so, and that you are accustomed to my style of writing.'

Your offprints reached me just at the time when I was leaving for a short trip to Holland, and your letter reached me at the Hague. I do not know how to thank you enough for the trouble which you have taken in order to arrive at the exact significance of my work, and to make it understood by English-speaking anthropologists and ethnologists, who, for the most part, appear hostile to it. Your article does my theory the most valuable of services, and only a scholar such as you, English himself, could explain to English scholars that they are wrong in looking down on works (whose faults, on the other hand, you do not disguise), which possess scientific interest, which can be useful to them, and which have truly been 'misrepresented'. My lecture at Oxford [Herbert Spencer Lecture, 1931] has appeared to be merely

a plea *pro domo*: one distrusts the advocate who pleads his own cause. If anything is capable of effectively combating the prejudice against me which exists in England, it is the exposition and examination of my theory to which you have devoted this article. I can imagine the work and the time which it has taken you, and I am profoundly grateful to you for it. It will certainly do much good, and has done it already, and I believe that it was necessary. Without it this theory ran the risk of remaining for a long time misunderstood, if not unknown, in the world of English-speaking scholars. You ask if I think that you have understood me properly—I do not hesitate to answer “Yes”, and I consider your article at least equal, from this point of view, to the best that has been written on my conception and my explanation (in so far as I try to explain) of primitive mentality. I do not find that you are ‘*over-critical*’, save in one or two places which I will point out to you. If you will allow it, in order to be as precise as possible, I am going to follow your article page by page, submitting my doubts, when I have any, to you, and my reflections. This is, I believe, the best way of confronting the idea which you have of this theory with that which I have tried to give.

P. 2. [Where I remark that the reception of Lévy-Bruhl’s views among English anthropologists is perhaps due partly to the unfamiliar key expressions he used in his writings, such as *prélogique*, *représentations collectives*, *mystique* and *participations*.] Like you I think that my terminology has greatly contributed to making English anthropologists ill-disposed and to giving them a distaste for reading me. However, this reason, although serious enough, cannot be the only one. But this is not the place to examine this question.

P. 3. (At the bottom of the page.) “Nevertheless it may be said . . .” [The passage is: “Nevertheless it may be said at the outset that Lévy-Bruhl in his works does not attempt to correlate the beliefs which he describes with the social structures of the peoples among whom they have been recorded.”] A just remark. I have made it myself, and I explained myself on this point in H.S.L. [Herbert Spencer Lecture]. I had to change my position when I came to know the facts better.

Pp. 4-7. [In which I state the characteristic differences, according to Lévy-Bruhl, between the thought of primitive, and the thought of civilized, societies.] No objection. You have entered thoroughly into my thought.

P. 8. “It seldom touches . . .” [The passage, which refers to criticism of Lévy-Bruhl’s writings by various authors, is: “It seldom touches Lévy-Bruhl’s main propositions.”] ‘*Quite right.*’

P. 8. “He makes savage thought far more mystical than it is . . .” This is an important point. ‘*I plead guilty*’, and I recognize that your criticisms appear just (you develop them on pp. 27-8), but I can say something in my defence. My intention was to introduce the idea (which seemed to me to be new), that there is a *real difference* between primitive mentality and that of more developed civilizations, particularly those of the West, and consequently, I was not obliged to give the most complete picture of this primitive mentality, including in it what is common to our own—which is

considerable and which I in no way try to deny—but to insist continually on that which is characteristic of it and constitutes the specific difference. All the same, I do not at all deny mystical elements exist in the mentality of the English and French peoples, etc.: but I thought I ought to insist on the rational character of this mentality in order that its differences from the primitive might emerge clearly.

I admit that in my work (and it is here that '*I plead guilty*') the savage is presented as more mystical and the civilized man as more rational than they in fact are. But I have done this '*on purpose*': I intended to bring fully to light the mystical *aspect* of primitive mentality in contrast with the rational *aspect* of the mentality of our societies. Once this difference is recognized—but 25 years ago nobody had pointed it out—I have no objection to all that you say; that the savage is not so exclusively mystical, that the civilized man is not so consistently rational. Perhaps I have been wrong in insisting so strongly on these differences. I thought that the anthropological school had done enough to make the similarities evident. On this point, I think those who will follow us will know how to keep the right balance.

Pp. 8-9. [Where I criticized Lévy-Bruhl's writings on the grounds of the insufficiency of the records which he used and of his use of the comparative method.] "The poor quality of the facts of which I make use—the weakness of the comparative method as I use it." More than once I have had occasion to explain myself on this matter (for example in reply to Mauss at the Société de Philosophie). I know well that one can consider travellers' tales and the memoirs of missionaries as very little to be relied on. And for a work of technical anthropology—for example on the institutions of some tribe or other—I would agree with you that it is preferable not to make use of them. But for the kind of researches which I intended (concerning the essential and general character of primitive mentality) I thought it legitimate not to disregard the evidences, often involuntary, which were furnished by such people as the Jesuits of New France, or Dobrizhoffer, etc. I know their minds, I can understand the factors of their personalities, and behind what they say I can find what they have seen. I have no need that they should have understood what they saw nor even of their having had some sort of scientific education. On the other hand more than one worker has gone off to do '*field work*', armed with a questionnaire furnished by an eminent anthropologist, and having followed it to the letter, has reported nothing interesting, at least to me.

Pp. 9-10. "A secondary selection has taken place . . ." [The passage is: "Out of a vast number of social facts observers have tended to select facts of the mystical type rather than of other types and in Lévy-Bruhl's writings a secondary selection has taken place through which only facts of a mystical type have been recorded, the final result of this double selection being a picture of savages almost continually and exclusively conscious of mystical forces. He presents us with a caricature of primitive mentality."] I admit this, but it was done deliberately, and I have not hidden it. . . . No,

this is not a caricature of primitive mentality. But it is an image through which I have wished to bring out strongly a dominant trait, leaving the rest in the shadow (and indeed cartoonists often work like this). I told you above the motives which led me to proceed like this. I have not claimed to give a complete analysis and description of primitive mentality—above all I was trying to bring further into the light what distinguishes it from our own.

Pp. 10–11. “To describe the collective representations of Englishmen and Frenchmen with the same impartiality and minuteness. . . .” [The passage is: “Clearly it is necessary to describe the collective representations of Englishmen and Frenchmen with the same impartiality and minuteness with which anthropologists describe the collective representations of Polynesians, Melanesians, and the aborigines of Central and Northern Australia, if we are to make a comparison between the two.”] This would be a fine piece of work whose results would be most interesting . . . but ought I, in all conscience, to undertake it in order to realize my design? Can I not take it as agreed that our *patterns of thought* (an excellent expression which I borrow from you, and which comes close to what I call “*habitudes mentales*” depending on “*l’orientation de la pensée*”) are sufficiently known for me to compare them with the “*patterns of thought of the savage*”?

You find, and not without good reason, that I ask much of the good will and patience of the reader in presenting him with four thick volumes (I scarcely dare admit that they are going to be followed by a fifth). What would it be if I ought to have conducted a parallel inquiry into the mentality of our compatriots!

I now go on to the five questions which you examine in sequence (beginning on p. 13).

(a) [I cited various authorities to show that Lévy-Bruhl was inquiring into a genuine problem in investigating the differences between primitive and civilized modes of thought.] Agreed.

(b) Pp. 15–19. [I discussed what Lévy-Bruhl means by “prelogical” and showed that he does not mean that savages are incapable of thinking coherently or are intellectually inferior to civilized man.] Among the parts of your article which have given me most pleasure and which will suffice to show that you have thoroughly understood me on this most important point. The passage concerning Mr. Driberg has amused me [where I showed that Driberg in criticizing Lévy-Bruhl says the same as he in different words] because, in reading *The Savage as He Really Is*, I had the same thoughts as you: if I had known how to express myself so as to be understood by Mr. Driberg, he would see that we are in agreement. As you say, he brings to my theory the support of his great experience in Africa. I have read with much profit his *Lango* and most of his other works.—I admit that the term “*prélogique*” was ‘*rather unfortunate*’.—You have also seen very clearly that according to me “*primitive thought is eminently coherent, perhaps over-coherent*”.

(c) [I discussed what Lévy-Bruhl means by "collective representations" and showed that whereas his critics say that he contends that savages think illogically what he is really saying is that savage thought is mainly unscientific and also mystical. He refers to the content, or patterns, of thought—social facts—and not to the processes of thinking—psychological facts.] Here the discussion becomes more refined and it becomes necessary for me to explain exactly what I mean by primitive "thought". I can at any rate say that at bottom it seems to me that there is no disagreement between us on this question. The fact that the '*patterns of thought*' are different does not, once the premises have been given, prevent the "primitive" from reasoning like us, and, in this sense, his thought is neither more nor less "logical" than ours. I have never made this appear doubtful and the way in which you explain my ideas on this point is of a sort to dissipate misunderstandings which have done me so much wrong among English and American anthropologists.

(d) [Here I discussed what Lévy-Bruhl means by "mystical": that collective representations of the supra-sensible form integral parts of perception. The savage cannot perceive objects apart from their collective representations. He perceives the collective representation in the object.] Yet here again you do me a great service. When I said that "primitives" never perceive anything exactly as we do I never meant to assert a truly psychological difference between them and us; on the contrary I admit that individual physio-psychological conditions of sensory perception cannot be other among them than as among us—but I did intend to say, as you put it (p. 25), "'that a savage's perception of, in the sense of noticing, or paying attention to, or being interested in, a plant is due to its mystical properties'". As a result I am inclined to subscribe to the two propositions which you yourself accept and which are formulated at the foot of p. 25. [The passage to which Lévy-Bruhl refers is: "A restatement of Lévy-Bruhl's main contentions about the mystical thought of savages is contained in the two following propositions, both of which appear to me to be acceptable: (1) Attention to phenomena depends upon affective choice and this selective interest is controlled to a very large extent by the values given to phenomena by society and these values are expressed in patterns of thought and behaviour (collective representations). (2) Since patterns of thought and behaviour differ widely between savages and educated Europeans their selective interests also differ widely and, therefore, the degree of attention they pay to phenomena and the reasons for their attention are also different."]

(e) Pp. 26-7. [I discussed here what Lévy-Bruhl means by "participations"—mystical relations between things.] I believe that on this notion of "participation" we are in agreement about essentials. Besides, as you remark, what I say about "participation" links up with what I have said about the "mystical" character of representations.

P. 28. "Mystical thought is a function of particular situations." I have committed "a serious error in failing to understand this point". [My criticism of Lévy-Bruhl here was that he does not adequately appreciate

that mystical thought is often a function of particular situations. Collective representations of a mystical kind may be evoked by sight of an object but they may not be invariably evoked. Savage thought has not the fixed inevitable construction that Lévy-Bruhl gives it.] Here, ' *I do not plead guilty* '. But I recognize that in my first two books my thought is perhaps not expressed with sufficient precision and accuracy. It is better expressed I believe in the introduction to " *Le Surnaturel* " and also in the H.S.L. [Herbert Spencer Lecture]. I do not find the argument which you present in the second half of p. 28 decisive. " The resulting pattern of belief may be a fiction since it may never be actually present in a man's consciousness. . . . " [My argument here was that there may be a big difference between a system of native beliefs as put together by a European inquirer and what any individual native believes, just as there is a difference between the formalized body of Christian theology and what an individual may know of it. Religious beliefs are held by the individual as isolated bits, as it were, and not as entire systems.] Would you say that the Oxford Dictionary " " may be a fiction " " and cannot give a true idea of the English language? The content of the Oxford Dictionary however has never been " " actually present in an Englishman's consciousness " ". On the other hand in every human mind there are always ineradicably fundamental mystical elements, which moreover can only manifest themselves through beliefs and practices which are necessarily social; and if one perhaps sees them most easily in " primitive " societies, they are by no means absent in other civilizations. If we could talk about this together it seems to me that we could arrive at agreement.

P. 30. " Savage thought has not the fixed inevitable construction that Lévy-Bruhl gives it."—*Agreed*. But if I give this impression it is because I have expressed myself badly—as ever through my attempt to make what is mystical and " prelogical " (in the good sense of this word, if I am understood as I wish to be) in primitive mentality stand out. I completely admit that numerous interests of every kind attract the attention of the primitive, that he is continually attentive to all the claims that are made upon him by the practical life, and the necessity of satisfying his needs, of nourishment, etc. etc., and that he is not uniquely preoccupied with the mystical powers of beings and objects. Far from that: he must live. I therefore accept what you say (pp. 30-1), and I believe that it can be reconciled with what I maintain.

P. 32. The relations of my theory with those of Tylor and of Frazer. [I discussed here some of the main differences in approach between Lévy-Bruhl on the one hand and Tylor and Frazer on the other, saying, among other things, that Lévy-Bruhl had no need to make a distinction between categories of magic and religion, and that whereas to Tylor and Frazer the savage believes in magic because he reasons incorrectly to Lévy-Bruhl he reasons incorrectly because he believes in magic.] Another passage for which I am very grateful to you and which shows that you have correctly understood me. I admire the *Golden Bough* and always recall the extraordinary impression

which it made on me ; to me it was a revelation. A new world appeared before my eyes. But I have never been able to interest myself in discussions about the relations of magic and religion and you very clearly explain why. He, Tylor, and their school base themselves on postulates and an over-simple psychology which seem to me little to conform to the facts and to be untenable. I have thought it a duty to take up a different position and I have tried to follow another path which seemed to me to lead more closely to an exact description of so-called primitive mentality. I am no doubt not altogether wrong since, from the point of view of an anthropologist with experience of field work, you conclude that my theory is not without use. But I regret that it has exacted from you prolonged and painful effort while considering it very fortunate for me that you have not recoiled from this task. And I wish to close this over-long letter in again thanking you with all my heart.

L. LÉVY BRUHL.

PS.—What can explain to a certain extent the evident misunderstanding among many anthropologists of my theory is the difference between the points of view in which they and I place ourselves. They relate what I say to the particular point of view of their science (which has its tradition, its methods, its achieved results, etc.). What has led me to write my books is not the desire to add, if I could, a stone to the edifice of this special science (anthropology, ethnology). I had the ambition to add something to the scientific knowledge of human nature, using the findings of ethnology for the purpose. My training was philosophical not anthropological. I proceed from Spinoza and Hume rather than from Bastian and Tylor, if I dare evoke such great names here.