Anthropology: Its Achievements and Future[1]

by Claude Lévi-Strauss

AMONG MY MANY CHERISHED recollections of the years I spent in the United States, 1 remains outstanding because it is associated with what, due to my inexperience, appeared to me as something of a discovery. This apparent discovery took place quite casually one day, when I stumbled upon a bookstore which specialized in secondhand government publications and where could be bought, for $2 or $3 apiece, most of the *Annual Reports* of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

I can hardly describe my emotion at this find. That these sacrosanct volumes, representing most of what will remain known about the American Indian, could actually be bought and privately owned was something I had never dreamed of. To my mind, they belonged rather to the same irredeemable past as the beliefs and customs of which they spoke. It was as though the civilization of the American Indian had suddenly come alive through the physical contact that these contemporary books established between me and their time. Although my financial resources were scant and $3 represented all I had to spend on food for the same number of days, this sum seemed negligible when it could pay for 1 of these marvelous publications: Mallery's *Pictographs,* Matthews' *Mountain Chant,* Fewkes's *Hopi Katcinas,* or such treasure troves of knowledge as Stevenson's *Zuni Indians,* Boas' *Tsimshian Mythology,* Roth's *Guiana Indians,* and Curtin and Hewitt's *Seneca Legends.*

Thus it happened that, volume after volume, at the cost of some privations, I built up an almost complete set (there is still 1 volume missing) of *Annual Reports* 1-48, which belong to the "great period" of the Bureau of American Ethnology. At that time, I was far from imagining that a few months later I would be invited by the Bureau to become a contributor to 1 of its major undertakings: the 7-volume *Handbook of South American Indians.*

Notwithstanding this close association and the years that have since elapsed, the work of the Bureau of American Ethnology has lost for me none of its glamour, and I still feel toward it an admiration and respect which are shared by innumerable scholars the world over. Since it so happens that in the same year that marks the 200th Anniversary of James Smithson, the life of the Bureau has come to an end (though its activities are carried on under a new guise), the time may be fitting to pay tribute both to the memory of the founder of the Smithsonian Institution and to the Bureau which has been one of its greatest achievements.

Ever since it was founded in 1879 (emancipating ethnology from geography and geology, with which it had until then been merged), not only did the Bureau avail itself fully of the amazing opportunity provided by the presence of scores of native tribes at a few hours' or days' travel from the great cities, but also "the accounts of custom and culture published by the Bureau compare in thoroughness and quality of reporting with modern ethnographic studies" (Lienhardt 1964:24). We are indebted to the Bureau for instituting standards of scholarship that still guide us, even though we but rarely succeed in attaining them.

Above all, the collection of native texts and factual observations contained in the 48 major *Reports* and certain of the subsequent ones, in the 200 or so *Bulletins,* and in the *Miscellaneous Publications* is so impressive that after nearly a century of use only the surface of it has been scratched. This being the case, one can only wonder at the neglect in to which this invaluable material has temporarily fallen. The day will come when the last primitive culture will have disappeared from the earth, compelling us to realize only too late that the fundamentals of mankind are irretrievably lost. Then, and for centuries to come, as happened in the case of our own ancestral civilizations, hosts of scholars will devote themselves to reading, analyzing, and commenting upon the publications of the Bureau of American Ethnology, which preserve so much more than has been preserved of other bygone cultures (not to mention the unpublished manuscripts placed in the Bureau's custody). And, if ever we succeed in enlarging our narrow-minded humanism to include each and every expression of human nature, thereby perhaps ensuring to mankind a more harmonious future, it is to undertakings such as those of the Bureau of American Ethnology that we shall owe it. However, nothing could be farther from my mind than the notion that the work of the Bureau belongs to the past; I believe, on the contrary, that all of us, together with its legal successor, the Office of Anthropology, should seek in these achievements a living inspiration for the scientific task ahead of us.

It has become the fashion in certain circles to speak of anthropology as a science on the wane, on account of the rapid disappearance of its traditional subject matter: the so-called primitives. Or else it is claimed that in order to survive, anthropology should abandon

[1] Remarks at the bicentennial celebration commemorating the birth of James Smithson, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 17 IX 65. To be published in *Knowledge among Men,* New York, 1966, Simon & Schuster.

fundamental research and become an applied science, dealing with the problems of developing countries and the pathological aspects of our own society. I should not want to minimize the obvious interest of these new researches, but I feel, nevertheless, that there is, and will remain for a long time to come, much to be done along more traditional lines. It is precisely because the so-called primitive peoples are becoming extinct that their study should now be given absolute priority.

It is not too late for anthropologists to set to work. As early as 1908, Sir James Frazer, in his inaugural lecture at Liverpool University, stated that classical anthropology was nearing its end. What have we witnessed instead? Two great wars, together with scientific development, have shaken the world and destroyed physically or morally a great many native cultures; but this process, however disastrous, has not been entirely 1-way. The 1st World War gave rise indirectly to Malinowski's new anthropology by obliging him to share the life of the Trobriand Islanders in a more durable and intimate manner than, perhaps, he would have done otherwise. And as a consequence of the 2nd World War, anthropologists were given access to a new world: the New Guinea highlands, with a population of 600-800,000 souls whose institutions are changing our traditional outlook on many theoretical problems. Likewise, the establishment of the new federal capital of Brazil and the building of roads and aerodromes in remote parts of South America have led to the discovery of small tribes in areas where no native life was thought to exist.

Of course, these opportunities will be the last. Moreover, the compensation they afford is small indeed, compared with the high rate of extinction afflicting primitive tribes the world over. There are about 40,000 natives left in Australia as opposed to 250,000 at the beginning of the 19th century, most, if not all, of them hungry and disease-ridden, threatened in their deserts by mining plants, atom bomb test grounds, and missile ranges. Between 1900 and 1950, over 90 tribes have been wiped out in Brazil; there are now barely 30 tribes still living in a state of relative isolation. During the same period, 15 South American languages have ceased to be spoken. Scores of similar examples could be given.

Yet, this is no reason to become discouraged. It is undoubtedly true that we have less and less material to work with. But we can compensate to some extent for this diminishing volume by putting it to better use, thanks to our greater theoretical and factual knowledge and more refined techniques of observation. We have not much left to work with, but we will manage to "make it last." We have learned how to look for the cultural "niches" in which traditional lore finds refuge from the impact of civilization: language, kinship, ethnobotany, ethnozoology, and the like.

But although the physical disappearance of populations that remained faithful till the very end to their traditional way of life does, indeed, constitute a threat to anthropology, curiously enough, a more immediate threat comes from an evolution that has been taking place in such parts of the world as Asia, Africa, and the American Andes, which used to be considered within the realm of anthropological studies. The population density of these regions was always high, and it shows no sign of decreasing; quite the contrary. The new threat to our studies is not, then, so much quantitative as qualitative: these large populations are changing fast, and their culture is resembling more and more that of the Western world. Like the latter, it tends to fall outside the field of anthropology. But this is not all, for the mere fact of being subjected to ethnographic investigation seems distasteful to these peoples, as though by studying the ways in which their old beliefs and customs differed from our own we were granting these differences an absolute status and conferring upon them a more enduring quality.

Contemporary anthropology thus finds itself in a paradoxial situation. For it is out of a deep respect for cultures other than our own that the doctrine of cultural relativism evolved; and it now appears that this doctrine is deemed unacceptable by the very people on whose behalf it was upheld, while those ethnologists who favour unilinear evolutionism find unexpected support from peoples who desire nothing more than to share in the benefits of industrialization, and who prefer to look at themselves as temporarily backward rather than permanently different.

Hence the distrust in which traditional anthropology is held nowadays in some parts of Africa and Asia. Economists and sociologists are welcome, while anthropologists are tolerated at best and from certain areas are simply banned. Why perpetuate, even in writing, old usages and customs which are doomed to die? The less attention they receive, the faster they will disappear. And even should they not disappear, it is better not to mention them lest the outside world realize that one's culture is not as fully abreast with modern civilization as one deludes oneself in believing it to be. There have been periods in our own history when we too have yielded to the same delusion, only to find ourselves struggling to regain balance after eradicating so recklessly our roots in the past. Let us hope that this dire lesson will not be lost on others. The question is, in effect: What can we do to keep the past from being lost? Is there a way of making peoples realize that they have a tremendous responsibility toward themselves and toward mankind as a whole not to let perish before it has been fully recorded this past which it is their unprecedented privilege to experience on a par with their incipient future? The suggestion has been made that in order to render anthropology less distasteful to its subjects it will suffice to reverse the roles and occasionally allow ourselves to be "ethnographized" by those for whom we were once solely the ethnographers. In this way, each in turn will get the upper hand. And since there will be no permanent privilege, nobody will have grounds to feel inferior to anybody else. At the same time, we shall get to know more about ourselves through the eyes of others, and human knowledge will derive an ever growing profit from this reciprocity of perspective.

Well-meant as it undoubtedly is, this solution ap-

pears to me naïve and unworkable, as though the problems were as simple and superficial as those of children unaccustomed to playing together, whose quarrels can be settled by making them follow the elementary rule: "Let me play with your dolls and I shall let you play with mine." To arrive at an understanding between people who are not merely estranged from one another by their physical appearances and their peculiar ways of life, but also stand on an unequal footing to one another, is a different question altogether.

Anthropology is not a dispassionate science like astronomy, which springs from the contemplation of things at a distance. It is the outcome of a historical process which has made the larger part of mankind subservient to the other, and during which millions of innocent human beings have had their resources plundered and their institutions and beliefs destroyed, whilst they themselves were ruthlessly killed, thrown into bondage, and contaminated by diseases they were unable to resist. Anthropology is daughter to this era of violence: its capacity to assess more objectively the facts pertaining to the human condition reflects, on the epistemological level, a state of affairs in which 1 part of mankind treated the other as an object.

A situation of this kind cannot be soon forgotten, much less erased. It is not because of its mental endowments that only the Western world has given birth to anthropology, but rather because exotic cultures, treated by us as mere things, could be studied, accordingly, as things. We did not feel concerned by them whereas we cannot help their feeling concerned by us. Between our attitude toward them and their attitude toward us, there is and can be no parity.

Therefore, if native cultures are ever to look at anthropology as a legitimate pursuit and not as a sequel to the colonial era or that of economic domination, it cannot suffice for the players simply to change camps while the anthropological game remains the same. Anthropology itself must undergo a deep transformation in order to carry on its work among those cultures for whose study it was intended because they lack a written record of their history.

Instead of making up for this gap through the application of special methods, the new aim will be to fill it in. When it is practiced by members of the culture which it endeavours to study, anthropology loses its specific nature and becomes rather akin to archaeology, history, and philology. For anthropology is the science of culture as seen from the outside and the first concern of people made aware of their independent existence and originality must be to claim the right to observe their culture themselves, from the inside. Anthropology will survive in a changing world by allowing itself to perish in order to be born again under a new guise.

Anthropology is thus confronted with tasks which would prove contradictory unless they were undertaken simultaneously in the same field. Wherever native cultures, though disappearing physically, have remained to some extent morally intact, anthropological research should be carried out along traditional lines and the means at its disposal increased to the utmost. And wherever populations have remained physically strong while their culture rapidly veers toward our own, anthropology, progressively taken over by local scholars, should adopt aims and methods similar to those which, from the Renaissance on, have proved fruitful for the study of our own culture.

From the very beginning, the Bureau of American Ethnology has had to face this 2-fold necessity by reason of the peculiar situation of the American Indians, who allied cultural remoteness, physical proximity, and a tremendous will to live, at least among some tribes, despite all the ordeals they have been subjected to; thus the Bureau was compelled from the start both to carry out ethnographic surveys and to encourage the natives themselves to become their own linguists, philologists, and historians. The cultural riches of Africa, Asia, and Oceania can only be saved if, following this example, we succeed in raising dozens (and they themselves hundreds) of such men as Francis La Flesche, son of an Omaha chief; James Murie, a Skidi Pawnee; George Hunt, a Kwakiutl; and many others, some of whom, like La Flesche and Murie, were on the staff of the Bureau. We can but marvel at the maturity and foresight, and hope for the worldwide extension, of what a handful of resolute and enlightened men and women knew should be done in the field of American studies.

This does not mean that we should be content merely to add material similar to that which is already available. There remains so much to be saved that the urgency of the task may make us overlook the present evolution of anthropology, which is changing in quality as it increases in quantity. This evolution, the recognition of which should make us more confident in the future of our studies, can be verified in many ways. To begin with, new problems have arisen which can still be solved, even though they have thus far received but scant attention. For instance, until recently anthropologists have neglected to study the elasticity of the yield of crops and the relationship between yield and the amount of work involved; yet 1 of the keys to the understanding of the social and religious importance of yams throughout Melanesia can probably be found in the remarkable elasticity of the yield. The farmer who may harvest far less than he needs must plant far more in order to be reasonably certain to have enough. Conversely, if the harvest is plentiful it may so widely exceed expectations that to consume it all becomes impossible; this leaves no other use for it than competitive display and social food presentation. In such cases, as in many others, we can render the observed phenomena a great deal more significant by learning to translate in terms of several different codes phenomena that we have been apprehending in terms of 1 or 2 codes only.

A broad system of equivalents could then be established between the truths of anthropology and those of neighbouring sciences which have been progressing at a similar pace: I am thinking not only of economics, but of biology, demography, sociology, psychology, and logic, for it is through a number of such adjustments that the originality of our field will best appear.

There has been much question lately as to whether anthropology belongs among the humanities or among the natural sciences. In my opinion, this is a false problem: anthropology is unique in not lending itself to such a distinction. It has the same subject matter as history, but for lack of time perspective cannot use the same methods. Its own methods tend rather towards those of sciences also synchronically oriented

but not devoted to the study of man. As in every other scientific undertaking, these methods aim at discovering invariant properties beneath the apparent particularity and diversity of the observed phenomena.

Will this assignment deter anthropology from a humanistic and historical outlook? Quite the opposite is true. Of all the branches of our discipline, physical anthropology is probably the closest to the natural sciences. For this very reason, it is worth noting that by refining its methods and techniques, it has been getting ever closer to, not farther from, a humanistic outlook.

For the physical anthropologist, to look for invariant properties traditionally meant to look for factors devoid of adaptive value from the presence or absence of which something could be learned about the racial divisions of mankind. Our colleagues are less and less convinced, though, that any such factors really do exist. The sickle-cell gene, formerly held to be such a factor, can no longer be so considered if, as is now generally accepted, it carries a certain measure of immunity to malaria. However, as Livingstone (1958) has brilliantly demonstrated, what appears an irretrievable loss from the point of view of long-range conjectural history can be viewed as a definite gain from that of history as historians conceive it, that is, both concrete and at close range. For by reason of the adaptive value of the sickle-cell gene, a map showing its distribution throughout Africa would make it possible for us to read, as it were, African history in the making, and the knowledge thus obtained could be correlated with that acquired from language and other cultural maps. Therefore, the invariant properties which have vanished at the superficial level reappear at a deeper functional level and, instead of growing less informative, turn out to be more meaningful.

This remarkable process is actually taking place everywhere in our field. Foster has recently given new life to what most of us held to be an exhausted question —the origin of the potter's wheel—by pointing out that an invention is neither simply a new mechanical device, nor a material object that can be described objectively, but rather a manner of proceeding which may avail itself of a number of different devices, some crude and others more elaborate. In the field of social organization, I myself have tried to show that kinship systems should not be described by their external features, such as the number of terms they use or the way they classify, merge, and distinguish all possible ties between individuals. In so doing, all we can hope to obtain is a long, meaningless list of types and subtypes, while if we try to find out how they work, that is, what kind of solidarity they help to establish within the group, their apparent multiplicity is reduced to a few basic and meaningful principles.

Similarly, in the field of religion and mythology, an attempt to reach beyond external features, which can only be described and arbitrarily classified by each scholar according to preconceived ideas, shows that the bewildering diversity of mythical motifs can be reduced to a very small number of schemes, each of which appears endowed with a specific operational value. At the same time there emerge for each culture certain sets of transformation rules which make it possible to include in the same group myths previously held to be markedly different.

These few examples, chosen among many others, tend to show that anthropology's traditional problems are assuming new forms while none of them can be said to be exhausted. The distinctive feature of anthropology among the human sciences is to look at man from the very point where, at each period of history, it was considered that anything man-like had ceased to exist. During antiquity and the Middle Ages, this point was too close to permit observation, since each culture or society was inclined to locate it on its neighbour's doorstep. And within a century or so, when the last native culture will have disappeared from the Earth and our only interlocutor will be the electronic computer, it will have become so remote that we may well doubt whether the same kind of approach will deserve to be called "anthropology" any longer. Between these limits lies the only chance that man ever had or will have to look at himself in the flesh while still remaining a problem unto himself, though one he knows can be solved since it is already certain that the outer differences conceal a basic unity.

Let us suppose for a moment that astronomers should warn us that an unknown planet was nearing the Earth and would remain for 20 or 30 years at close range, afterwards to disappear forever. In order to avail ourselves of this unique opportunity, neither effort nor money would be spared to build telescopes and satellites especially designed for the purpose. Should not the same be done at a time when half of mankind, only recently acknowledged as such, is still so near to the other half that except for men and money, its study raises no problem, although it will soon become impossible forever? If the future of anthropology could be seen in this light, no study would appear more urgent or more important. For native cultures are disintegrating faster than radioactive bodies; and the Moon, Mars, and Venus will still be at the same distance from the Earth when that mirror which other civilizations still hold up to us will have so receded from our eyes that, however costly and elaborate the instruments at our disposal, we may never again be able to recognize and study this image of ourselves.

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