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Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien

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Abstract: A French philosopher turned into an arm-chair anthropologist, Lévy-Bruhl sought an alternative to Western logic in primitive cultures—in which he saw confusedly a mode of thought that strayed from the principle of non-contradiction to the extent that one thing could be conceived as something other than itself. He conceived a dualist and synchronic concept of human psychology as divided between intellect (most developed in the “modern mind”) and affect (most developed in the “primitive mind”). This dualistic and hyper-relativist system, which supposed an excessively homogeneous and mutually distinct conceptions of “primitive” and “modern” peoples, has been highly criticized, even by Lévy-Bruhl himself in his old days. However, this author’s search for a radical epistemological alternative apart from Western rationality might be reconsidered now that the dominant trends in anthropology seek to break from the classic paradigms.

Trained as a philosopher at the Ecole normale supérieure, a specialist in ethics and the history of European philosophical thought, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (Paris, 1857–1939) turned his focus on the “sociology of primitive peoples” at the beginning of the twentieth century. Through this study he sought an alternative to Western logic in primitive cultures—in which he saw confusedly a mode of thought that strayed from the principle of non-contradiction to the extent that one thing could be conceived as something other than itself, or one species could merge with another. Thus, for example, the Bororo Indians of the Amazon believe that the neighboring Trumai people sleep at the bottom of the river like fish. Contrary to British evolutionists, particularly Tylor and Frazer, who viewed such beliefs as primitive error that could be corrected by the historical process of civilization, Lévy-Bruhl proposed a dualist and synchronic concept of human psychology as divided between intellect and affect. The former tendency, linked to the objectivist apprehension of reality, was the province of Western logic, while the latter, driven by the subjective emotions of a spontaneous spirit, fell within the “pre-logical mentality” of primitive peoples. This mentality, which was supposedly resisting conceptual thinking, was based on a fluid relationship between things and beings that would be considered separate entities from a rationalist standpoint—a free association of heterogeneous elements, animate and inanimate. Lévy-Bruhl called this process of limitless fusion “participation,” and he believed it could be found, in one form or another, in all primitive societies, regardless of their distinctive ethnographic characteristics.

The Lévy-Bruhlian system therefore implies the existence of a radical discontinuity within the human spirit between participation and conceptualization—between the “primitive” and “civilized” stages—instead of a gradual, historically determined continuity as conceived in evolutionist doxa. If, as Durkheim said, it is society that shapes the mind, for Lévy-Bruhl the primitives’ lack of conceptualization and abstraction stemmed from the “mystical” nature of their collective being. That is what inclined them to believe in invisible yet real forces, to

set no boundaries between nature and culture or between the natural and supernatural, thus remaining impervious to experience and insensitive to contradictions. If the primitive is less able to abstract and generalize, however, his practical sense (assuming a male subject) allows him to satisfy his material needs (through hunting, fishing, etc.). But here too, he attributes his success to the mystical influences that guide a purely intuitive technique, not based on any knowledge of the laws of causality. The primitive does not see himself as a subject distinct from the beings and things that surround him; he does not grasp the universe as formed of separate substances. All things, animate or inanimate, spiritual or material, participate in the same order of reality. Moreover, the individual is plural: as in totemic systems of identification, it cannot be separated from the non-human entity that emblemizes its social being (for instance, people from the Thunderbird clan “are” thunderbirds and humans simultaneously).

The primitive mentality formulated by Lévy-Bruhl is in some sense organic, pre-psychic, pre-cultural. The primitive “feels” and “lives” the participations (1949, 77 [1975, 94]) but “does not separate them from his person, and does not have the idea of objectifying them. It is the observer who points them out, characterizes them, defines them and delimits their function. The Australian himself is barely more aware of them than the fact that he breathes and digests.” In this regard Lévy-Bruhl, although not a field researcher, anticipated the reflexive ethnography prevalent today. Seeking to penetrate the mystical substance of the primitive, he was wary of the “vocabulary that we are obliged to use for the description and analysis of the primitive mentality’s processes. This vocabulary is completely inadequate and the whole time risks misrepresenting these processes ” (1949, 126 [1975, 157]). Toward the end of his life, cultivating a certain Rousseauist nostalgia for man still attached by the umbilical cord to Nature, he came to regard scientific anthropology as a “hopeless enterprise and thus foolish. Furthermore, if, for once in a while, the efforts had the appearance of success, the result would be without objective value, and equivalent to the success of a skillful conjuring trick” (1949, 133 [1975, 167]). The primitive mentality was, in his eyes, virtually ineffable and irreducible to the laws of dialectics.

While critics who knew him personally (like Durkheim, Radin, Lévi-Strauss or Evans-Pritchard) reproached his muddled comparatism, his primitivist essentialism, and the speculative nature of his system, Lévy-Bruhl was, in fact, his own harshest critic, stigmatizing the contradictions of an intellectual endeavor to conceptualize, in some fashion, the pre-conceptual. He ended up abandoning his notion of the pre-logical mentality, recognizing, instead of two exclusive mentalities, a “mystical mentality which is more marked and more easily observable among ‘primitive peoples’ than in our own societies, but it is present in every human mind,” and also recognizing that the primitive mentality could be relatively conceptual. Nonetheless, he persisted in his belief that primitive thought was “deeply rebellious to intelligibility” (Lévy-Bruhl 1949, 82 [1975, 101, 99]), accessible only through “participation” and thus incompatible with Western thought. And when he believed he might have found an ethnographic alter ego in the pioneer of participant observation, Frank H. Cushing, the American who lived with the Zuñi Indians from 1879 to 1883, this experience of internalizing another culture, unique at the time, merely confirmed to Lévy-Bruhl the inadequacy of Western intellect faced with the alterity of the primitives. Cushing’s articles, Lévy-Bruhl wrote (1910, 50 [1985, 70]), “give us . . . the feeling of a form of mental activity with which our own would never exactly correspond. Our habits of thought are too far removed from those of the Zuñis. Our language, without which we can conceive nothing, and which is essential to our reasoning, makes use of categories which do not coincide with theirs.”

In his final years, Lévy-Bruhl carried his dualistic notion of the human psyche to its conclusion, asserting the fundamental incommunicability of the primitive and the modern and the resulting impossibility of the ethnographic approach. Most surprising is the fact that he saw Cushing—the brilliant autodidact “turned Indian,” whose force of analytical insight, resolutely rationalistic, would influence Durkheim and Mauss as well as Lévi-Strauss—as the catalyst for revealing this impasse. All these paradoxes justify a renewed interest in Lévy-Bruhl’s hyper-relativist stance in his search for a radical epistemological alternative—a quest he considered doomed from the start—now that the dominant trends in anthropology seek to break from the classic paradigms.

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