# Claude Lévi-Strauss's Two-Part Harmonies

By LARRY ROHTER   Published: November 7, 2009   The New York Times

Millions of words have been written trying to explain or apply the theories of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss since the publication of his work "Structural Anthropology" in 1958. More than a few of the resulting texts in disciplines as varied as sociology and philosophy are dense, turgid and jargon ridden, or so the complaint goes. However, Mr. Lévi-Strauss himself could be simple, direct and elegant when he wanted to be. Structuralism, he once said, is simply "the search for unsuspected harmonies" across cultures. In fact, his life's work was dedicated to detecting and codifying what he believed to be the underlying structures common to all societies. Working among Amerindian tribes in the Amazon and elsewhere from the 1930s onward, he found those harmonies to be especially manifest in mythology. In any society, he maintained, "the purpose of a myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction."   As he saw it, the human mind tends to organize thought and culture around binary opposites and to try to resolve the resulting tension through the creative act of mythmaking. Here are four pairs that, explicitly or implicitly, are important in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who died a little over a week ago just shy of 101.

THE RAW AND THE COOKED "Raw" and "cooked" are shorthand terms meant to differentiate what is found in nature from what is a product of human culture. That dichotomy, Mr. Lévi-Strauss believed, exists in all human societies. Part of what makes us human, however, is our need to reconcile those opposites, to find a balance between raw and cooked. Where is the dividing line between nature, which is emotional and instinctive, and culture, which is based on rules and conventions? In a metaphoric sense, a cook is a kind of mediator between those realms, transforming an object originally from the natural world into an item fit for human consumption. Therefore, by "cooked," Mr. Lévi-Strauss means anything that is socialized from its natural state. Yes, the definition of what is considered edible varies from one society or religious group to another. But all have binary structures that separate the raw and the cooked, the fresh and the rotten, the moist and the dry or burned.
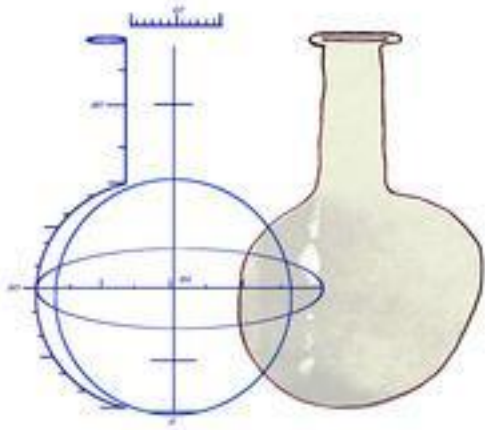
THE TINKERER AND THE ENGINEER In "The Savage Mind" (1962), Mr. Lévi-Strauss proposes a distinction between modes of conception, design and manufacture. The "tinkerer" or "artisan," two possible renderings of the somewhat ambiguous French word that he used, "bricoleur," works mainly with his hands, using materials that already exist, which he tries to put together in different ways. The "engineer," in contrast, is a proto-scientist. He has a more abstract mental universe, which allows him to invent tools, devices or materials and transcend the boundaries that society imposes. Though both the tinkerer and the engineer face comparable obstacles, they navigate them in dissimilar fashion, with the tinkerer being more typical of the approach of "the savage mind." One way is spontaneous; the other methodical. "A truly scientific analysis must be real, simplifying and explanatory," Mr. Lévi-Strauss wrote, while the tinkerer is confined to a more narrow and immediate focus.
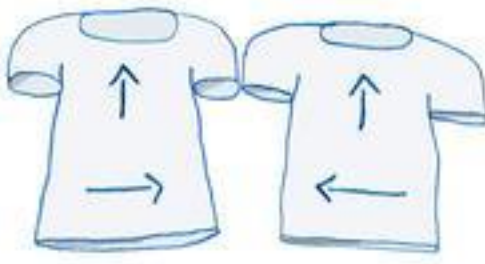
THE I AND THE WE Mr. Lévi-Strauss was loath to accept the notion of "us versus them," because it didn't conform to his belief in societies' shared structures. Instead, he often focused on the distinction between "I" and "we." In looking at kinship patterns, for example, especially among the Amerindian peoples who provided much of his research material, he was more attentive to the rules governing relationships between different family groups than the roles of the individuals making up those families. Examining both Oedipus and Amerindian myths, Mr. Lévi-Strauss suggests that the universal incest taboo is the way human societies resolve the opposing dangers of excessive love and hatred for close blood relations. He also rejected one of the fundamental features of Western thought: seeing individual self-expression as the height of creativity. Because he was so interested in mythmaking, a collective process that occurs incrementally over time, he favored the notion of a communal approach to making culture, writing in "Tristes Tropiques," "The I is hateful."

THE LANGUAGE AND THE WORD From the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, Mr. Lévi-Strauss borrowed the distinction between "langue" (tongue, or language) and "parole" (word), and then gave it a twist. The tongue, the underlying system of language, is something "belonging to a reversible time," Mr. Lévi-Strauss wrote, outside a particular moment. A word, in contrast, is a specific utterance that, once expressed, cannot be reversed. Think of a piece of sheet music: it can be read or played from left to right, from one page to another, in a horizontal, linear fashion leading to a coda, a definite conclusion. That is "parole." Or it can be studied vertically, in hopes of discerning harmony and other structural relationships between the notes in the treble and bass clefs. That is what Mr. Lévi-Strauss considered "langue."

Illustrations by Leif Parsons.