

STRUCTURE,

STRUCTURAL, STRUCTURALISM

Unlike positivism, which took the form of a protest by the individual against the canonization of the general, and unlike existentialism, which expressed a revolt of the concrete against abstraction erected into a dogma—structuralism is an ideology of capitulation to the bureaucratic and technocratic supremacy of means over ends and of society over individuals. The dogmatic systems of the last decades have finished by creating an intellectual atmosphere in which “the whole” is put in the foreground, leaving its component “parts” in the shade.

Structuralism idolizes structure at the expense of its components, and structural analysis at the expense of induction and generalization. For the structuralists, supporting elements are seen merely as interrelated elements, and things related to one another are swallowed up by the relations between them. In their eyes, the elements that make up a structure are in

Translated by Nicolas Slater.

Structure, Structural, Structuralism

themselves meaningless; they exist only by virtue of being grouped according to a certain pattern of organization. Only *relations* are regarded as constant, and thus as proper objects of a science; *properties* are merely ephemeral and illusory.

* * *

It has long been known that things, and our information concerning them, are *structures*. The Latins used *struere* to mean the constitution of a whole out of a number of parts; in discovering the function of the middle term of a syllogism, Aristotle merely analysed the structure of deductive reasoning. Since then, science has always been concerned with the analysis of the structure of inert objects and living organisms, as well as the structure of the logical forms of knowledge. Marx had no doubt, either, of the methodological validity of the structural analyses that led him to discover the infrastructure and the superstructure of human society.

Every *object* of knowledge is a whole consisting of a number of parts, and every piece of *knowledge* of the object finishes by crystallizing into a system of knowledge. Structural analysis is a phase through which knowledge must needs pass. Thought cannot manage to reflect the essential properties of an order of things before it has disclosed how the constitutive elements of each thing belonging to this order are interconnected. We have come to a much deeper understanding of the essential features of heredity since the discovery of the deoxyribonucleic acids and of the way they form the polymers carried on the chromosomes. The essential properties of all the objects of a particular order illuminate the essential character of the structure of any object of the same order. An essential structure is a system of necessary and constant relations between the variable components of any object belonging to the order. The rational knowledge of essential structures is preceded, in the last resort, by the empirical decomposition of certain entireties on the basis of their component parts. By a process of induction, the analysis and the synthesis of individual structures give place to the analysis and the synthesis of essential structures.

Since any object is at one and the same time a structure and a component element of another structure, the properties of

things are determined as much by their internal relations as by their external ones. Properties arise and manifest themselves in and through these relations, but they cannot be reduced to them.

The disasters that have been caused by the subjection of men to ideas—instead of ideas to men—have re-aroused a belief in Providence. Only this time, fate has not set down its programme in the revealed writings of “Holy Scripture;” instead, it has written it directly into the structure of atoms, molecules, cells, and human society. As long as ideas remain under the control of men, errors are eliminated for the time being; but as soon as men fall under the control of ideas, errors become catastrophic, and we observe a reappearance of the belief in a fate outside man himself. Structure then becomes despotical, and its component elements are thus robbed of all their properties.

At the microcosmic level, it is true, matter is not solid any more but porous, it consists of more space than substance, though this does not mean that it could be reduced to a mathematically expressible system of relations. The more complex and ample the forms are in which matter can exist, the less their properties can be reduced to relations or the relative independence of the elements to an absolute dependence as regards structure.

Roman Jakobson said somewhere that the nightingale, even if he lived among poultry, would never come to crow like a cock but would always sing like a nightingale; whereas a child of the Bororo tribe, for example, if he was brought to France at an early age, would learn to speak French like any Frenchman. Does this mean that men are more subject to external relationships than nightingales, that it is not men that speak a particular tongue but a particular tongue that speaks through men (Saussure), or even that it is not men that think in myths but myths that think through men (Lévi-Strauss)? . . . Quite the opposite! It means that men, having invented tools and language, have liberated themselves from nature’s domination, becoming cultural creatures: that is, beings possessing more liberty in the face of nature, and better able to stand up to her. They are *constrained* to speak in a certain tongue in order to know the world and to organize how it is to be changed; but they are *free*, at some particular moment, to choose the tongue. Man is not capable of advancing on the road of knowledge and

domination of his surroundings, unless he is shod with the slippers of a particular tongue; the moment he takes off one pair, he must needs put on another. But it is men who speak and think in tongues, and not the other way around.

The anthropoid became Man the moment he learned to use his mouth not only to assimilate Nature, but also to *oppose* his surroundings with a sublime "No!" . . . Man is not only an extension of nature, but also its opposite. The inner life of animals continues in their outer life, and vice versa, whereas the inner life of men is in opposition to their outer life. In culture, "*anti-* comes before *pro-*" (Picasso). Whereas nightingales' nests are an extension of nature and are always built in the same way, the edifices of men are opposed to nature and are always built differently, all the way from the hovel to the skyscraper.

The detachment of society from nature is only the first phase of the human miracle. Man cannot be reduced to the system of relations that gave rise to him. We must take care not to oppose "psychologism" with "sociologism," instead of with a dialectical understanding of the essence of man. Man is at the same time a social and an individual being. The supreme product of society is the creative individuality of man. The humanization of man will only be complete when "we" gives place to "I." For it is only the "I's"—from the magicians of primitive communities to the savants of our day—who have been able to translate their society's needs into ideals and thus to drive their society onwards. Society only becomes aware of the tendencies acting in it through the awareness of great personalities. Social progress is not possible without the nonconformism of creative spirits. The first word of true social significance that the child learns to pronounce is "No!" . . .

If man was only the instrument of language, then humanity would be faced with its informational death—the moment would arrive when we would have nothing further to communicate to each other. But by its very structure, language is merely the chief instrument with which men transform their anxiety and their discontent into new ideas which speed the march of history. They are able to use a finite number of phonemes and grammatical rules to formulate an infinite number of pronouncements. The aversion of our present age for errors and

lies constitutes the chief source of originality in our culture. The resistance that language presents to the transformation of a mental vibration into an idea is like the resistance that matter presents to the erection of an edifice. Language supports the flight of ideas; it does not hamper it and does not direct it. This is even more true of art, for artistic language is less constrictive than everyday language. Once used, metaphors lose their expressiveness and they cannot constitute a paradigmatic treasury.

The validity of a work does not consist, as structuralists hold, in the structure of the signifier, that is the structure of what we see and hear, but in the necessary distance between the signifier and the significatum; which is set, and opposed, by its creator. If the distance is too small, the work is banal; if it is too great, then the work is hermetic.

Only a genius can find the right distance, provoking a maximum of tension in our artistic understanding. But in order to find it, he must feel this tension himself. In the process of artistic creation, signifier and significatum go hand in hand. It is not the artist's mission to deck out with a splendid signifier some poor banality that is foreign to him, but to communicate the superabundance of aversions and aspirations of his own personality.

Without the logical dimension of the significatum, the signifier no longer arouses any aesthetic emotions, but merely subhuman reactions. The logical dimension of the significatum does not weaken but reinforces the expressivity of the signifier, its power to move and to convince; it concentrates, reaffirms and deepens this power.

* * *

The fiasco of the various dogmatic systems has led a number of present-day thinkers to be thoroughly sick of all ideologies. The fight against dogmatism has extended to another fight, itself no less dogmatic: against all ideologies of any kind whatever.

The hypertrophy of relationships at the expense of related elements, and of structure at the expense of essence, has led us to an anti-ideological philosophy in which man is reabsorbed by nature. Science, once it has been de-ideologized, ceases to

Structure, Structural, Structuralism

be a means for adapting nature to man's ideals, and becomes an instrument for adapting man to the tendencies of nature. Although he is the most lucid of the structuralists as regards the methodological limits of structural analysis, Claude Lévi-Strauss declared in a recent interview that "the human sciences inevitably lead to the dissolution of man as a separate reality." In fact, without being a separate reality, man is nonetheless a being whose existence is "qualitatively distinct." The material continuity between nature and man does not abolish their dialectical discontinuity. As seen by the structuralists, the Cosmos is an immense scripture—transcendent for things, and transcendental for words—in which both the relations between things and the relations between words are determined *a priori*.

By reducing man to the relations through which he comes about and manifests himself, structuralism has absorbed the world's *why?* into the question of *how to write it?*

And the disappearance of man, of his creative personality, implies at the same time the disappearance of essence, causality, finality, and hence of any other ideology. The anti-anthropomorphic aim of "theoretical" anti-humanism—which must not be confused with anti-humanist theories—leads in the last resort to total de-anthropologization. But anthropomorphism is the only modality in which man can know that which exists independently of him.

Ideology, as a set of ideas expressing and accentuating the tendencies of a certain social group at a particular moment, does not *in all circumstances* hamper scientific knowledge; usually, it stimulates it. Man cannot be reduced to a half-sensory, half-intellectual mechanism. He is also an affective being, a maker of ideals. By the very nature of things, affectivity must direct and sharpen knowledge, and not obscure it.

Only insofar as man sets himself up as his supreme goal do the extraordinary means he creates find blessing.

Nehru once said to André Malraux that while one must keep both feet on the ground, one must not keep one's head there too.

The reduction of the world to a synchrony and diachrony of real *structures* implies that knowledge must also be reduced to description and operationality. No doubt, structures exist, and structural analyses are undeniably valid. But beyond structure,

there are the essence of things and the causes of their development. Even essential structures are only systems of necessary relations between the parts of all the things that have the same essence. Men can only know the *present* state of things in the light of their *future*. The struggle by which men realize their ideals takes place precisely in the interval between the present and the future. Through goals, predictions and plans of work, the future plays a direct rôle in the present, on the level where the action is taking place; it is the superiority of the planned future that constantly keeps alive our discontent with the present that has already been realized. Desires, hopes and nostalgia do not prevent our knowledge from penetrating the laws of things and their future; they stimulate it to do so. Thought is permanently nurtured by men's dislike of all that they see as a hindrance on the road from the present to the future. The separation of "science" from "ideology" would confine science to the present, depriving it of its view of the future, and transforming it from a means of *transposing* the future to the present, into a means of *adapting* the past to the present.

A humanity without impetus, aspirations or ideals would end up by slipping out of culture and falling back into nature. "If the nations do not appeal to these works with their emotions, not merely with their knowledge, what will happen? In the space of some fifty years, our civilization, which would like to be and which believes itself to be the civilization of science—which it is—would turn into a civilization more subject to instincts and elementary dreams than any the world has ever known."¹

However, the history of humanity is a process of humanization of nature, not one of dehumanization of culture. Through his discovery of tools and of speech, man became the only creative being. Through his thought, he has managed to cover the road from carved stones to electronic brains, using one and the same physiological apparatus all the way. It is through his thought that he has been able to liberate himself from nature's domination, and add a *nöosphere* to the biosphere. Thought, with its biological power, has enabled man to leave behind his phase of adaptation to nature, and to go on to transform nature. Our

¹ André Malraux, *Antimémoires*, Gallimard, Paris, 1967, p. 348.

Structure, Structural, Structuralism

auto-tele-mechanised culture is the product of the same creature, physically and intellectually speaking, that hunted the bison.

Man is qualitatively distinct from all other beings not because he takes an interest in the *material* of things, but because he is interested in their *meaning*. Man can transform the world, because he is the only creature to create meanings. He is the only creature to have succeeded in fabricating things not only for their consumable material but also for their communicable significance. By exploiting what nature held out to him, man has forged *tools* which he has turned against the rest of nature, and *symbols* with which he has formulated and transmitted his knowledge of nature. The sensible, material side of things can only be modified in the light of their intelligible significance. Thought is not a negligible residue of the operations that are carried out by means of symbols (signs). It is thought that differentiates radically between man's *mediate* contact with nature and the *immediate* contact of other creatures with their environment. Men only achieve domination over nature through the intermediary of meanings.

The tool is also a symbol. It symbolizes certain similar properties of the things it acts on. A fragment of nature is only a tool insofar as it has reference to something other than itself. In a broad sense, writing began at the same time that tools were invented. Since the very beginning, man felt a need to rest his speech and his thought not merely on the one irreversible dimension of time, but on the three reversible dimensions of space as well. Graphic symbolism—as a tool, as gestures performed during work, as pictures—has an advantage over phonic symbolism in that it is more stable and more easily intelligible: sight is more important to man than hearing. Figurative drawing is closer by its origins to writing than to art. It is more of a symbolic transcription of language than a description of nature.

The importance of graphic signs, as of those of speech, does not consist in their “physical characters” but in the thoughts they carry. Graphic systems are interesting not for what they present but for what they represent. The materiality of writing is subordinate to the spirituality of thought. The continual separation of “significatum” and “signifier” has made the latter transparent and the former an abstraction. The history of writing is a process

by which the materiality of the signs has become increasingly *transparent*. The picture, the pictogram, the ideogram, the letter, have each less intrinsic meaning than their predecessor. It is the increasing tension between the significatum and the signifier that increases the intensity of thought. Aesthetic emotion, too, is unleashed by the tension that is established between the significant metaphor and the thought that is signified.

Now that structuralists are drawing the attention of their contemporaries not to thought but to the system of signs in which and through which thought functions, it is comforting to recall that Ferdinand de Saussure—the father of structural linguistics—feeling, as was right, that speech is closer to thought than is writing, protested at what he himself called “the cult of the letter as picture.” He considered “the tyranny of writing” as a new enslavement of the spirit to the domination of matter.

By its unidimensionality and its irreversibility, speech is, it is true, closer to thought than is writing with its tri-dimensionality and its reversibility. But writing, being subordinate to speech and to thought, does not hamper the unfolding of a thought, any more than the rigidity of matter prevents the raising of an edifice.

Writing can only “solidify” *thoughts*. Thus we have the appearance of prejudices, banalities, platitudes, commonplaces, clichés and stereotypes. As for *thought*—it cannot become “alienated” from itself. Sooner or later it will remove anything that gets in its way.

Those who fix their gaze on the letter and ignore the spirit are like travellers who stop in fascination in front of a timetable, without continuing on their journey . . . Sounds and pictures only become “language” if they are “the immediate reality of *thought*” (Marx).

* * *

Structure exists, and structural analysis is the way to know it; but structuralism is an ideology which by taking as absolute values the relations between things instead of their properties, makes determinism hypertrophy at the expense of liberty.

The need to seek the object, independently of the ambitions of the subject, is today something quite natural. And since, by

Structure, Structural, Structuralism

contrast with the *properties* of a thing, its *structure* is what it is, without relation to the desires of the seeker, structural analysis is an efficient method.

But structuralism refuses to come down to man himself and to restore him to all his prerogatives as his own supreme goal, in whose light everything must be appreciated. By maintaining that men do not act in society but society in men, structuralism dissolves the human personality in the social structure from which it arises and through which it manifests itself. By reducing man to the station of a thing, structuralism reduces time to the present and thus abolishes man's most human property: *the freedom to contest and to create*.

In being the only system of organization of matter which puts out more information than is put into it, man is a permanent source of negative entropy. By his inexhaustible inventiveness, he sets himself against disorganization by reinforcing organization, and he sets himself against uniformity by enriching the processes of differentiation. The limits of human inventiveness are not *logical* but merely *historical*. A certain limit exists *eternally*, but there is never any *eternal limit*.

The informational death of culture will therefore only take place when man is only a link in the natural chain of question and answer. But by the negativity, interrogativity and creativity of his thought, man is able to reverse the direction of the second law of thermodynamics. Anthropology is therefore not an "entropology" but a "negentropology." Man is capable of saving nature even in the face of the avalanche of increasing entropy.

Unlike the elements that make up the structure of a thing, the human personality is free to understand the direction in which social relations are developing and to hasten the change, avoiding the futile wastage of human energy along the various by-ways of history. This is why structuralism seems to me to be an ideology of resignation on the part of the consumers in the face of the technocratic trends of modern society.