



LECTURES

Introduction to “Teleologies of Structuralism”

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This piece introduces a set of lectures and responses given as part of a three year discussion about the fate of structuralism in the last century. These discussions mark a hundred years since the publication of structuralism’s foundational document, *Le cours de linguistique générale*, formulated from the last courses taught by Ferdinand de Saussure. In this introduction, readers are reminded of the role played by Claude Lévi-Strauss to constitute an “insurgent” intellectual movement at the mid-point of the 20th century.

Keywords: structuralism, Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, history of anthropology

It is now over a hundred years since several Genevan students and devotees of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) took upon themselves the thorny task of reconstructing a work that would end up having great impact—a century of impact and counting. Published in 1916 as *Cours de linguistique générale*, Saussure’s posthumous “book” was cobbled together by these students from the notes of those who had attended his last lecture courses. From these improbable beginnings came a book that is now often remembered as the apical ancestor for an insurgent intellectual movement that swept through the human sciences in the twentieth century: structuralism. This scholarly insurgency is important to remember at a time when the term “structuralist” is sometimes used to refer to work that is considered old-fashioned. Sixty years ago, structuralism was the challenger, and the pieces in this section on the “teleologies of structuralism” explore why.

The 2016 centennial of the *Cours’* publication was the immediate reason for three of us¹ to consider the first century of structuralism, and think about how structuralism continues to manifest itself—sometimes without speaking its own name. We organized

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1. The organizers of the series on structuralism, “Teleologies of Structuralism,” are Michael Silverstein, Christopher Ball, and myself. For an initial statement, see Ball, Paz, and Silverstein (2013).



five different interdisciplinary events to consider this history, from among which come the papers and responses published here. We were astonished by the positive reception to the questions we were posing: What is the proper “fate” of structuralism as an overarching system of thought? As an intellectual movement that swept across the human arts and sciences? As an historical phenomenon commanding attention? And what are the very teleologies brought into being within structuralist thought itself?

The term “teleology” here is meant to encapsulate the various strands of questioning, from the structuralist description of goal-oriented behavior to the historical playing out of the structuralist—and perhaps, too, the poststructuralist—project. These issues have a long past. As John Kelly put it in his contribution to the first event in the series, a reflective round table, structuralism offers one road out of the dilemma articulated long ago by Kant (1991): whether it is reason or “the dismal reign of chance” that drives human history. For these reasons, we entitled our collective discussions “teleologies of structuralism.”

Although Saussure’s thought and the posthumous *Cours* provided the impetus for these questions, it is another structuralist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, who plays a leading role in this particular collection of anthropological approaches. This focus reflects the fact that the history of structuralism as an intellectual insurgency is also the history of the midcentury arrival of a new period of anthropology in the North Atlantic academy, one with a broad impact on other disciplinary traditions. To be sure, the study of language played an early role in the development of structuralism. At the turn of the twentieth century, insights similar to Saussure’s were being developed separately and then in concert by linguists and anthropologists in the United States and Eastern Europe, including Russia. And it was linguists of the Prague Circle who first used the term “structural” in the late 1920s to describe the phenomena they studied, with Saussure’s work now a recognized foundation. However, the structuralist insurgency really caught fire, it seems, in the World War II moment of New York—where Lévi-Strauss would meet Franz Boas and Roman Jakobson—and then in particular in the post-bellum moment of Paris, where Lévi-Strauss would displace Jean-Paul Sartre as that city’s leading public intellectual and thus initiate an intense engagement with structuralism by scholars from across a spectrum of disciplines (see Dossé 1997). Also of note, it was Jacques Derrida’s (1970) famous paper on Lévi-Strauss—often remembered as a critique—at a Johns Hopkins Humanities conference in 1966² which is routinely credited as marking the beginning of poststructuralism (as it is came to be known in the US academy). Lévi-Strauss—and really anthropology itself—marks this entire history.

Although this *HU* section on “teleologies of structuralism” focuses on this anthropological contribution, the discussions we had were purposely interdisciplinary. They began with a round table entitled “Structuralism’s First Century: 1916–2016” in May 2013 at the University of Chicago, with contributions from Lenore Grenoble, John D. Kelly, Thomas Pavel, Marshall Sahlins, and Haun Saussy. Our second symposium, “Structuralism’s Minuses, Structuralism Plus,” featured lectures by Nicholas Cook, Jonathan Culler, and Danilyn Rutherford (included here), also held at the University of Chicago, in March 2014, followed shortly thereafter by a lecture by Johannes Fehr, “Saussure’s Anticipation of Poststructuralism,” in April 2014. We held a larger two-day conference, “Cosmologies

2. This 1966 conference, which took place fifty years after the *Cours*, was the focus of Jonathan Culler’s contribution to the second of our events, a conference at the Franke Institute, University of Chicago, on “Structuralism’s Minuses, Structuralism Plus.”



of the Collective,” at the University of Notre Dame, with keynotes by Andreas Glaeser, Benjamin Lee, Walter Benn Michaels, and Elizabeth Povinelli, as well as twelve other papers. Finally, we gathered at the University of Toronto Scarborough’s Centre for Ethnography in October 2015 to discuss “Living Structuralism/Le structuralisme vif,” with Philippe Descola’s paper here published, and Chris Ball and Michael Lambek responding, and Jane Guyer giving a paper on “Shape-Shifting and Thinking within Transitions,” with Janice Boddy and Ato Quayson responding. Michael Silverstein’s remarks on Saussure’s key insights were also presented at Toronto. We are grateful to all these participants for contributing to the debates over the continuing impact of structuralism.

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Les téléologies du structuralisme: une introduction

Résumé : Cet essai introduit un ensemble d’essais en conversation qui s’inscrivent dans une discussion longue de trois ans au sujet de l’essor du structuralisme au vingtième siècle. Cette conversation, entamée à l’heure du centenaire de la publication du document fondateur du structuralisme, le Cours de Linguistique Générale établi à partir des cours de Ferdinand de Saussure. Dans cette introduction, on évoque le rôle de Lévi-Strauss dans la fondation d’un mouvement de pensée révolutionnaire à la moitié du 20e siècle.

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