

Mr. President, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur de France, Colleagues,
 Ladies and Gentlemen: My first words will be to apologize for delivering an extemporaneous address. It is not out of lack of respect for The Johns Hopkins University, or for the Department of Anthropology, to which I now have the honor of belonging, the brilliance of which I could appreciate this morning, during a meeting with its professors and graduate students. Indeed, the reason is simple: It is far more difficult for me to read a text in English than to try to speak it.

Next I wish to express my deep gratitude, and I am sure I may do so as well on behalf of Dr. Chester Kerr, for the great honor that has been bestowed upon us today. I am all the more grateful because, as you may know, some 35 years ago I spent several years of my life in the United States. It so happens that, for me, the recollection of the years of my youth and of this country are indissolubly linked. Every time that I have an opportunity to return here, it is as if I were recapturing a little bit of my youth--a complete illusion, needless to say. But, perhaps it is on account of this life, divided between your country and mine, that you have thought me worthy of this great distinction. It is as if--and this is only a hope that I entertain--I might ^{have ed} help to build a bridge between an American intellectual tradition deeply embedded in the empiricist and positivist character of the Anglo-Saxon world stemming from Bacon through Locke and Hume, and the French rationalist tradition which is usually associated with the name of Descartes.

Out of this attempt, out of this mixture, if I may say so, a very strange offspring has appeared, bearing the name Structuralism, a creation in which, I fear neither America nor France would be willing to recognize themselves. In my view, structuralism is trying at one and the same time to make the social sciences a little bit more scientific, even while its practitioners

are quite aware that the social sciences are limited as sciences, and aspire to levels that we will probably never be able to reach. If you will permit me, I would like to offer a few reflections on this paradox. I have said that we are trying to make the social sciences a little more scientific. Why, and how, can be summarized, I believe, in terms of four principal reasons. First, we need to recall an old lesson, one first taught in history by Marx, then in linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure and, about at the same time, in psychology by Freud. That is, that what we perceive, what we believe, what appears at the level of consciousness, does not consist of the really important phenomena, *as those can only be reached* ~~for we must attempt to discover those~~ at a hidden level. And this insight, of course, was made possible when Descartes made his fundamental distinction between sensory data--smelling, touching, hearing, seeing and the like, which are always misleading--and the true primary qualities that physical science should solely consider, that is, extension and movement in ^{his} philosophy. *in a different way* Second, we take note that this is also what Kant told us, when he asserted that what made knowledge possible was neither percepts nor ideas, but what he called categories of understanding *that is, a kind of entities which are not of the same as believe to perceive* ~~that is, some part of a completely different nature of~~ the things we ~~are trying to understand~~. And if this deep structure, to use modern terminology, hidden beneath the surface structure, were to remain of the same nature as the surface structure, then we would be led toward a regression ad infinitum, and imprisoned in a kind of vicious circle. Third, we have tried to introduce into the social sciences the fundamental idea that we are looking at things which are extremely complicated and difficult, sometimes even impossible to describe because of their complexity. Yet if instead of looking at the things ^{themselves} ~~sitself~~ we look at the relation ^s which prevails between things, then

(meaning
Descartes'
philosophy)

we will discover that these ~~relations~~^{do} are altogether more simple and less ~~general~~^{numerous} than the things themselves, and that they can give us a firmer basis for investigation.

I am perfectly aware that, in opposition to this kind of approach to the social sciences and to social phenomena, several critiques may be raised, and have been raised. The first is that our hypotheses, or our interpretations, cannot be refuted, and it is only in a true science that it is possible to demonstrate the falsity of a hypothesis. To this assertion I will ^W answer: if this is true for a science which has reached an advanced stage of development, it would have proved impossible for a science in its incipient state. If such a condition had been imposed upon physics at the outset, or upon chemistry, or upon biology, then these sciences would never have existed. As a matter of fact, within the modern, advanced stages of these sciences there are hypotheses and interpretations which cannot be refuted. I am referring, of course, to the criterion of prediction. Yet it is Popper himself who says of Darwinism that *it is the best explanation we have, and what we ourselves as social scientists are trying to do is those explanations are best, of which, one cannot say that they are true or false, only to offer better explanations - which cannot be said to be true or false -* ~~only that they are better explanations~~ (than those accepted before--which certainly does not mean that they will remain good explanations forever. Indeed, quite the opposite: later on, better explanations will prevail, and later, even better explanations--and so on. It is a progression, and not an end which we can claim to reach.

The second criticism refers to the impossibility of experimenting in the social sciences. The great superiority of the physical or biological sciences inheres in that any hypothesis set forth anywhere in the world ~~is~~ ^{can be} immediately subject to an experiment, or to numerous experiments, which can serve to verify or to refute. Obviously we cannot experiment with human ~~societies~~^{societies} ~~society~~^{and practical} for moral reasons; and even if we had the power to do so, it

(these are Popper's actual words)

would take too much time. All that we can do--and this is the strength, the value, of anthropology--is to go throughout the world in order to seek readymade experiments. Those readymade experiments are embodied in the four or five thousand societies which exist, or have existed, on the surface of the earth, and of which we have some records, during the documented portions of human history.

It is by virtue of the existence of these societies that I believe that it is possible for the social sciences to become somewhat more rigorous and to make some progress toward joining the more advanced sciences--let us call them the "true sciences"-- and so-called social, or (as we Nevertheless between the former and the latter, there is a difference which we should not overlook.) prefer to say in French) "humane sciences." Whenever some great discovery is made in physics, chemistry or biology, there is an immediate general agreement on a common frame of reference, which much simplifies the forward advance of that science. If you take, for instance, the theory of relativity some years ago, you will find that everybody agreed it was from this theoretical perspective that one should try to work. For quantum mechanics, the same consensus held. In biology, as soon as the subfield of molecular biology took shape, there was general agreement that this was, at the time, the more fruitful approach. One need only look at the proceedings of the National Academy of Science in this country to see that practically all biologists are currently working with the same assumptions. Why, then, in our case--the anthropological case--is it not at all the same situation? It is very striking that, whenever one of us anthropologists advances an interpretation ^{or} and an hypothesis, hardly anyone is prepared to discuss the case, and to say "you are right" or "you are wrong," for such and such a reason, dealing with the hypothesis in question. Instead, the kind of response we are likely to receive is that this interpretation is of no interest, because reality ought to be studied at a completely different level,

and the level ^{one} ~~you~~ chooses ^{said to be} is of no value ^{by others} to us. It is this inability--provisional, I hope, but all the same, this inability--to achieve a common frame of reference in the development of our discipline, which reveals our weakness in relation to "true science."

~~Now we have tried~~ ^{may try} to go a little farther, and to ask why the situation is as I've described. ~~And~~ The reason, in my opinion, is that, in the long run, what we are trying to do, whether as historians, sociologists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, or whatever, is to fathom, at diverse levels of interpretation, what is going on in the human mind. Our difficulty is that it is impossible to prove anything about the mind, because the mind is not something we may plumb, ~~given our methodologies~~, and it is always possible (indeed, essential) to postulate that, when we uncover a deep structure, there will be another structure even deeper, and yet another deeper yet. The mind is not of the same order as the things we are able to study; ~~the way we apprehend things that lie outside of us has put us in a kind of impossible situation, one which cannot be overcome~~ ^{and this is because the mind is not a thing - it represents the way we apprehend things, and this discrepancy confronts us with a contradiction which it may be forever impossible to overcome}

Now the question is--and this will be my final observation--whether this unhappy situation is specific to the social sciences or whether it does not exist to some extent in all the sciences, even the more advanced ones. It has been very heartening for us in the past years to see that ~~the borrowing of models has been going on, that models have been borrowed from the social sciences by~~ ^{are increasingly being} ~~more~~ ^{the} more advanced sciences. It is, for instance, striking that, when trying to describe the genetic code, biology has borrowed heavily and is still borrowing, from linguistics; and that biologists are also borrowing from sociologists when they speak, for instance, of cell sociology--looking at communication between cells as a phenomenon comparable to social process. And it seems to me that, in a different way, and

perhaps to a more limited extent, the advanced sciences are now confronted with those same antinomies and contradictions we have ourselves confronted for so long. Thus for instance, molecular biologists have pointed out over and over again that the components that translate the genetic code are themselves coded in DNA. ~~and that~~ ^{It follows that} in order to make a code, a code is accordingly needed. There appears to be a kind of vicious circle here; it

may be that it is as impossible in the long run to explain what is life as it ~~has proved~~ ^{will probably} impossible for us in the social sciences to explain what is the mind, and what is ~~thought~~ ^{consciousness}. It is striking, moreover, that the historical approach has of late been invading biology, physics and chemistry.

Biology, for instance, since it has now completely abandoned the old idea of a unilinear evolutionism going from elementary life forms to more complex, and from complex to even more complex, and so on, is now viewing evolution rather in the same light as historians consider history. That is, biology is now concerned with showing that at the same time that there is progress and movement, there is also regression; that rather than unidirectionality, there is a multiplicity of directions; that instead of a ~~staircase~~ ^{"revolutionary tree"} (which was the illustration fashionable in the last century), there is ~~development in~~ ^{a branching pattern more like} ~~an intricate bush, the growth pattern of which can be described but not accounted for by a simple law.~~ ^{every possible direction.} The same case may be made in regard to the attempt

to reduce chemistry to physics--a great problem of the more advanced sciences, and, in the long run, a problem in the history of the cosmos, a history which is obviously a unique event, one which cannot be explained, cannot be proved, cannot be refuted or falsified. ¶ Of course, a great difference remains between the hard sciences, if I may say so, and our own. This difference is that these problems, these antinomies, these difficulties which are logically impossible to solve, confront the more advanced sciences only when they engage the ultimate problems and there are a great many problems they can solve before confronting the ultimate questions. And yet,

we are confronted with these difficulties at every step. This is one of the fundamental weaknesses--and perhaps also the fundamental greatness--of the humane sciences: that all problems pertaining to human-kind are ultimate problems for humankind. There is no problem, however small, that does not concern each of us, because ^{our life interests,} our personal history, our temperament, our prejudices are immediately implicated in every problem. This is probably the reason why the social sciences ~~are not~~ ^{should not pretend} ~~really trying~~ to reach truth, which is probably impossible of attainment, but ^{more modestly some amount of} wisdom--the achievement of which is supremely difficult, as a matter of fact. But if we are able to make even some limited progress towards wisdom, then we may be--and this is perhaps our advantage--we may be more ready to resign ourselves to the general truth that science will remain forever incomplete.

Thank you.



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DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

(301) 366-3300, Ext. 1256

December 27, 1977

Professor Claude Lévi-Strauss
Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale
11 Place Marcelin-Berthelot
75231 Paris CEDEX 05
FRANCE

Dear Professor Lévi-Strauss,

L such
Thank you for your gracious letter of 14 December. I took the liberty of sharing with Bill Sturtevant your query concerning the suitability of a topic/as "Are the social sciences true sciences?" His first response was to observe that your solicitude for our Department—that is, the possible effects of such subject matter upon our trustees—was characteristic of your thoughtfulness in general, a finding in which I heartily concur. It is truly very considerate of you to seek our views in this way.

In fact, the subject strikes me as admirably suitable. Should you wish to put the question more declaratively—the social sciences and the humanities, or in some other similar form—that would prove equally suitable, I believe. My feeling is that this institution is so firmly committed to the idea of broad general education, and of the university as such, that no harm could come from a humanistic answer—certainly not when issuing from one of the world's few great scholars of humankind.

I have learned that Air France, now empowered to fly to New York, is not at this moment maintaining its daily service to Dulles Airport. It appears that you will be able to depart from Dulles as scheduled on your return, but that you may have to fly the Concorde to New York City, there to change planes for a connecting flight to Baltimore, on your way here. I keenly regret this alteration. While I do not believe it will increase your travel time, I shall keep you informed in case Air France resumes its daily service to Dulles. I believe that President Muller has written to you concerning the activities planned for you here. Believe me, I shall do everything in my power to hold the demands upon you during your stay to an absolute minimum.

I hope that this season has given you time to rest up from your recent travels, and I express again not only our warm good wishes to you and to your family, but also our gratitude to you for choosing to help us and to hearten us with your coming visit.

Yours sincerely,

Sidney W. Mintz
Sidney W. Mintz

COLLÈGE

DE

FRANCE

CHAIRE

D'ANTHROPOLOGIE SOCIALE

Paris, le February 28, 1978

Dear Professor Mintz:

Back in Paris after an ideal return trip (3 hours and 32 minutes from take-off to landing) let me tell you once again how deeply moved I was by the wonderful welcome which I got from you and Mrs Mintz. Those two days in Baltimore under a glorious sun stand in my memory as a delightful intermission in my daily chores, and all the more so as the weather in Paris, while much warmer, remains rainy and dull.

It was a great pleasure getting acquainted with your colleagues and graduate students. Please extend my thanks and regards to all of them. You have a fine department for which I am sure that a great success lies ahead.

I have sent word to Yvonne Verdier that she should send you a copy of her thesis if she has one available. In any case I was told that it will be published in book form.

As soon as I am through with my lecture course I am looking forward to read "Worker in the Cane".

Thanking you again and with respectful regards to Mrs Mintz please believe me, cordially and gratefully,

Yours,

Claude Lévi-Strauss

Claude Lévi-Strauss

COLLÈGE

DE

FRANCE

CHAIRE

D'ANTHROPOLOGIE SOCIALE

Paris, le Mardi 6, 1978

Dear Professor Mintz:

I was already indebted to you for a great many things and here comes Reisdancer's "The Japanese", as if you, together with Tokus Hopkins, have not been generous enough!

It is an engrossing book through the help of which I shall freshen up my recollections and learn much more than I know. Let me thank you for it and for everything else. My respectful regards to Mrs Mintz and cordially and gratefully, yours,

Jacques Lévi-Strauss

P.S. For French "fade", would "savoureux" do?