

Book Review

Patrick Wilcken: *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The poet in the laboratory*. New York: Penguin, 2010.

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If Patrick Wilcken's book about Claude Lévi-Strauss is described as "the first English-language Lévi-Strauss biography"², perhaps this fact also indicates the difficulties with such a confrontation of Lévi-Strauss' oeuvre and Anglo-American thought. Take for instance the translation of the title of Lévi-Strauss' work *La Pensée Sauvage*, literally 'savage thought' or 'wild thought', which in English becomes *The Savage Mind*. Here the rather unspecified and polysemic notion of 'thought' is immediately turned into a thing that we call the 'mind', which might then be taken and investigated as an object according to the empirical method.

Patrick Wilkin, as the jacket cover tells us, grew up in Sydney and graduated in anthropology at Goldsmiths College, London University. He works on the Brazil desk at Amnesty International. His first book *Empire Adrift: The Portuguese Court in Rio de Janeiro, 1808-1821* indicates his enduring interest in Brazil. Indeed he cites a reading of Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques* and its evocation of Brazil in the 1930s, as one of the prompts that led to the writing of this book.³

The section of the biography that deals with Lévi-Strauss' trip to Brazil, initially as an academic in the newly established University of São Paulo, and subsequently doing field work in the Matto Grosso do Sul and Mato Grosso states of Brazil, is one of the richest parts of this work. Lévi-Strauss was not one for the rigours and slow pace of what had become the standard for anthropological research in the tradition of Malinowski and Margaret Mead. Wilcken describes this approach as "the Malinowskian ethnographic gold standard – the early-twentieth-century loner, painstakingly learning the native language, submerging himself in their culture" [88].⁴

Upon his arrival in Brazil, as Wilcken recounts, even Rio's spectacular scenery left Lévi-Strauss unimpressed, a fact that, as Wilcken notes, still smarts in Brazil. For example, the singer Caetano Veloso paraphrased Lévi-Strauss' comment regarding the Sugarloaf and Corcovado mountains in his song aptly named *O Estrangeiro*, or 'The Foreigner':

The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss detested Guanabara Bay
It looked to him like a toothless mouth.⁵

Nonetheless, we can propose that Lévi-Strauss' distaste for the discomforts of field work, as well as his propensity to discern patterns beyond the superficiality of empirical observations, was precisely what allowed him to establish a very different approach to ethnology. Wilcken recounts that during the First World War, Lévi-Strauss was stationed behind the Maginot line. There, gazing at a bunch of dandelions, he examined a seed head with its filaments in the shape of a perfect sphere, Wilcken cites him as later recalling, "It was there that I found the organizing principle of my thought". It was this organizing principle that would be further elaborated through the reference to the structure of language, following Lévi-Strauss' later encounter with Roman Jakobson in New York.

One of his first field trips was to a small settlement of the Caduveo people near the Patagonian border. Despite the disappointment of finding the Indians there very debased (*déculturés*), he was struck by the patterns – once tattooed but now painted – on the faces of the women and girls, using a fine bamboo spatula, tipped with *jenipapo* juice. Lévi-Strauss was at once interested in the aesthetics of these fine scrolls and arabesques, as well as this manner of preserving their culture, despite its debasement. He collected hundreds of these patterns and only later developed the tools to analyze the logic that underlay them, and to connect them to designs in other cultures, such as those on pottery from the island of Marajó, thousands of kilometres away [65-69].

Similarly, on the visit of just three weeks to a village of the Bororo tribe, Wilcken describes how, despite the wealth of culture and mythology that were preserved amongst them, Lévi-Strauss' attention was drawn by the layout of the village. He “surveyed each hut and plotted their relationships to one another. He drew diagrams in the earthen yard of the various imaginary dividing lines, the sectors they formed and the complex network of rights, duties, hierarchy and reciprocity through which they were defined” [71]. What, for Lévi-Strauss, resulted from this (as Wilcken cites from *Tristes Tropiques*) was:

[...] a ballet in which two village moieties strive to live and breathe each through and for the other; exchanging women, possessions and services in fervent reciprocity; intermarrying their children, burying each other's dead [...] [71-72].

Such discoveries and analyses that Lévi-Strauss made in his overview of many Brazilian tribes are perhaps not accessible to the ethnographer who lives with the tribe, learning to speak and think as they do, therefore identifying with their culture rather than being able to formulate the pattern that underlies such a culture. Quite opposite to this, Lévi-Strauss' major field expedition moved from one tribe to another along a path that had been hacked a quarter of a century before through the backlands of Mato Grosso towards the Amazon for the purpose of establishing a telegraph line.

Prior to his time in Brazil, Lévi-Strauss' “three mistresses” were Freud, Marx and geology [45]. His return to France in 1939 on the eve of the Second World War was short-lived. He left two years later aboard a ship bound for New York, with, for company, André Breton and other “German, Austrian, Czech, Spanish and French Jews and political agitators” [125]. It was during his time in New York that Lévi-Strauss came into contact with Alexander Koyré and, significantly, Roman Jakobson and structural linguistics. The latter provided a key to draw an organizing principle amongst the raw material he had gathered in Brazil. Here, in the New York Public Library, he was able to finally write his thesis on the Nambikwara people, and to begin work on his first great book, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Wilcken's account of Lévi-Strauss' time in New York is also of great interest, particularly in tying these various influences to which he had been subject, to the production of this fundamental work which set the direction of his future research and theoretical discoveries.

It becomes evident, upon reading Wilcken's biography, how much the early Lacan owed to Lévi-Strauss. It also becomes striking upon reading this account, that if in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (first published in 1947) Lévi-Strauss studies the prohibition of incest through Freud's work *Totem and Taboo*, then in his 1955 paper “The Structural Study of Myth”, published in English, he takes up the Oedipus myth. Thus, in these two first major theoretical advances, Lévi-Strauss comes to grips with what Lacan would later call the two great myths of Freud.

Nonetheless, to read Wilcken's biography from the angle of psychoanalysis is something of a disappointment. References to psychoanalysis are clichéd and the only citation of Lacan, the obligatory "the unconscious is structured like a language," is itself derived from a secondary source [228]. Beyond this, Lacan is characterized as one of a number of "structuralists" [228, 291] or elsewhere "modernists" [225-248]. Perhaps there is a missed opportunity here, both to examine Lévi-Strauss' debt to Freud, as well as what was made of Lévi-Strauss' work by Lacan. This is particularly so in the light of this book as being a self-styled "intellectual biography". Curiously though, this is described as, in part, a "strategic decision" by Wilcken because he was unable to glean many details on Lévi-Strauss' personal life.⁶ It is certainly worth noting that Lévi-Strauss withheld, from Wilcken, the details that might have led to a type of psychobiography. The latter, it would seem, is an essential aspect of Wilcken's approach to ethnography. This is in contrast to Lévi-Strauss' approach in which the imaginary relations and revelations in the Malinowskian tradition are discarded in order to give way to an emphasis on a structure of a different order.

Whilst Wilcken seems comfortable on Brazilian soil, he appears less so in relation to French culture and the French intellectual scene. Often the very notion of being 'French' is reduced to a hackneyed insinuation. Thus, on page 260, we are told that Lévi-Strauss' approach to practical and aesthetic problems in the *La pensée sauvage* is that of a *bricoleur*—a tinkerer, an improviser— which, Wilcken insists, is "a very French idea". On the following page we are told that the content of the work referred to "was Lévi-Strauss at his most arcane, theoretical discourse at its most French". Perhaps in this moment Wilcken is winking at the reader, engaging him in a knowing glance as each knows what the 'French' are really like. This sort of cultural cliché is rather gratuitous, particularly when it is coming from an anthropologist. Since Wilcken seems unable to penetrate this "theoretical discourse", by referring to it as 'French', it remains circumscribed and inaccessible to him.

But perhaps this is also a sort of cross-Channel misunderstanding. Ultimately Wilcken seems at odds with Lévi-Strauss' approach and method which consists of the development of an argument or a theory, even if it starts out from an empirical observation. It is precisely this approach that Wilcken characterizes as being 'French'. To this he opposes the empiricist approach and its reliance on so-called 'evidence'. Thus, in discussing the incest taboo, Wilcken puts forward that: "Though the incest taboo is deep-rooted in human societies, evidence now points toward its biological, adaptive functions, an argument ridiculed by Lévi-Strauss" [177].

A couple of pages further on, this notion of "evidence" – itself uncriticized – effectively becomes a writing-off of the entirety of Lévi-Strauss' oeuvre: "Like Freud, Lévi-Strauss's claims were ambitious, though not always fully backed up by the evidence" [179].

Wilcken also privileges the image, *contra* Lévi-Strauss. Thus in reference to the book of his photos from the 1930s, *Saudades do Brasil*, Lévi-Strauss wrote that his response to these photos was "the impression of a void, a lack of something the lens is inherently unable to capture". This void or lack is quickly filled in by Wilcken: "But for anyone other than Lévi-Strauss, the images are richly evocative and reveal a keen eye for visual expression" [338]. But richly evocative of what? Wilcken supplies an imaginary supplement to what lacks in the image, unable to remain with or to make use of this lack.

Wilcken puts forward that one approach to Lévi-Strauss is as he saw himself, as an *artiste manqué* [337], a failed, or literally, a lacking artist. Wilcken takes this as an ironic comment that Lévi-Strauss had missed his artistic calling but perhaps we could take it in a different

way, precisely in a literal way: Lévi-Strauss was an artist who was able to put his lack to work in the production of his oeuvre, which enabled him to go beyond the imaginary appearance of things. He was always interested in the aesthetic aspects of primitive culture, as we have seen with the Caduveo, but he did not remain fixated at the level of a fascination for the image. His aesthetic interests culminated in his last book, *Regarder, écouter, lire* (*Look, Listen, Read*), effectively a history and theory of aesthetics, published in 1993 when he was in his mid-eighties.

But despite Wilcken's critique of a methodology that is quite different to his own, his biography of Claude Lévi-Strauss is a tribute to an intellectual scope and inventiveness that the empirical method precludes. The biography concludes with a type of wistful yearning for the type of creativity with which Lévi-Strauss' work is imbued:

Few thinkers have been so relentlessly inventive; even fewer have covered so much ground. Lévi-Strauss' inspired break from mainstream thought at midcentury changed the humanities forever. From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, an era left rudderless after the collapse of the "grand narratives" that drove thought through a good portion of the previous century, one can finally look back at Lévi-Strauss's extraordinary output with a sense of nostalgia for an age when thinkers still had the intellectual space to work in, and were not forced down today's ever narrowing corridors of knowledge [340].

Can we read in this longing for a supposed bygone era, a self-critique of the author's approach, that of a submission to the narrowing corridors of knowledge through its insistence on narrowly-defined 'evidence', and the corresponding relinquishment of inventiveness?

Notes

¹ Analyst of the School, *The Freudian School of Melbourne, School of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*.

² Transcript of interview with Patrick Wilcken by Ramona Koval, The Book Show, ABC Radio National. <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/claude-levi-strauss-the-poet-in-the-laboratory/2958832>.

³ Transcript of interview with Patrick Wilcken by Ramona Koval, The Book Show, ABC Radio National. <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/claude-levi-strauss-the-poet-in-the-laboratory/2958832>.

⁴ Wilcken, Patrick. *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The poet in the laboratory*. New York: Penguin, 2010. Page references to this work are given as numbers in square brackets.

⁵ Veloso, Caetano. *Estrangiero*. Electra/Musician, 1989.

⁶ Transcript of interview with Patrick Wilcken by Ramona Koval, The Book Show, ABC Radio National. <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/claude-levi-strauss-the-poet-in-the-laboratory/2958832>.