

---

# Reading 1.1

---

## Race, History, and Culture

CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

A culture's chance of uniting the complex body of inventions of all sorts which we describe as a civilization depends on the number and diversity of the other cultures with which it is working out a common strategy.

### RACE AND HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

The development of human life is not everywhere the same but rather takes form in an extraordinary diversity of societies and civilizations. This intellectual, aesthetic and sociological diversity is in no way the outcome of the biological differences, in certain observable features, between different groups of men; it is simply a parallel phenomenon in a different sphere. But, at the same time, we must note two important respects in which there is a sharp distinction. First, the order of magnitude is different. There are many more human cultures than human races, since the first are to be counted in thousands and the second in single units. . . . Second, in contrast to the diversity of races, where interest is confined to their historical origin or their distribution over the face of the world, the diversity of cultures gives rise to many problems; it may be wondered whether it is an advantage or a disadvantage for human kind. . . .

Last and most important, the nature of this diversity must be investigated even at the risk of allowing the racial prejudices whose biological foundation has so lately been destroyed to develop again on new grounds. . . . We cannot therefore claim to have formulated a convincing denial of the inequality of the human *races*, so long as we fail to consider the problem of the inequality—or diversity—of human *cultures*, which is in fact—however unjustifiably—closely associated with it in the public mind. . . .

### COLLABORATION BETWEEN CULTURES

A culture's chance of uniting the complex body of inventions of all sort which we describe as a civilization depends on the number and diversity of the other cultures with which it is working out, generally involuntarily, a common strategy. Number and diversity: a comparison of the Old World with the New on the eve of the latter's discovery [in 1492] provides a good illustration of the need for these two factors.

Europe at the beginning of the Renaissance was the meeting-place and melting pot of the most diverse influences: the Greek, Roman, Germanic and Anglo-Saxon traditions

---

Reprinted with permission from the *UNESCO Courier*, March 1996, Claude Lévi-Strauss.

combined with the influences of Arabia and China. Pre-Columbian America enjoyed no fewer cultural contacts, quantitatively speaking, as the various American cultures maintained relations with one another and the two Americas together represent a whole new hemisphere. But, while the cultures which were cross-fertilizing each other in Europe had resulted from differentiation dating back several tens of thousands of years, those on the more recently occupied American continent had had less time to develop divergencies; the picture they offered was relatively homogeneous. Thus, although it would not be true to say that the cultural standard of Mexico or Peru was [in 1492] inferior to that of Europe at the time of the discovery (we have in fact seen that, in some respects, it was superior), the various aspects of culture were possibly less well organized in relation to each other. . . . Their organization, less flexible and diversified, probably explains their collapse before a handful of conquerors. And the underlying reason for this may be sought in the fact that the partners to the American cultural "coalition" were less dissimilar from one another than their counterparts in the Old World.

No society is therefore essentially and intrinsically cumulative. Cumulative history is not the prerogative of certain races or certain cultures, marking them off from the rest. It is the result of their *conduct* rather than their *nature*. It represents a certain "way of life" of cultures which depends on their capacity to "go along together." In this sense, it may be said that cumulative history is the type of history characteristic of grouped societies—social super-organisms—while stationary history (supporting it to exist) would be the distinguishing feature of an inferior form of social life, the isolated society.

The one real calamity, the one fatal flaw which can afflict a human group and prevent it from achieving fulfillment is to be alone.

We can thus see how clumsy and intellectually unsatisfactory the generally accepted efforts to defend the contributions of various human races and cultures to civilization often are. We list features, we sift questions of origin, we allot first places. However well-intentioned they may be, these efforts serve no purpose for, in three respects, they miss their aim.

In the first place, there can never be any certainty about a particular culture's credit for an invention or discovery. . . . In the second place, all cultural contributions can be divided into two groups. On the one hand we have isolated acquisitions or features, whose importance is evident but which are also somewhat limited. . . . At the other end of the scale (with a whole series of intermediates, of course), there are systematized contributions, representing the peculiar form in which each society has chosen to express and satisfy the generality of human aspirations. There is no denying the originality and particularity of these patterns, but, as they all represent the exclusive choice of a single group, it is difficult to see how one civilization can hope to benefit from the way of life of another, unless it is prepared to renounce its own individuality. Attempted compromises are, in fact, likely to produce only two results: either the disorganization and collapse of the pattern of one of the groups; or a new combination, which then, however, represents the emergence of a third pattern, and cannot be assimilated to either of the others. The question with which we are concerned, indeed, is not to discover whether or not a society can derive benefit from the way of life of its neighbours, but whether, and if so to what extent, it can succeed in understanding or even in knowing them. . . .

#### WORLD CIVILIZATION

Finally, wherever a contribution is made, there must be a recipient. But, while there are in fact real cultures which can be localized in time

and space, and which may be said to have “contributed” and to be continuing their contributions, what can this “world civilization” be, which is supposed to be the recipient of all these contributions? It is not a civilization distinct from all the others, and yet real in the same sense that they are. . . . [It is] an abstract conception, to which we attribute a moral or logical significance—moral, if we are thinking of an aim to be pursued by existing societies; logical, if we are using the one term to cover the common features which analysis may reveal in the different cultures. In both cases, we must not shut our eyes to the fact that the concept of world civilization is very sketchy and imperfect, and that its intellectual and emotional content is tenuous. To attempt to assess cultural contributions with all the weight of countless centuries behind them . . . by reference to the sole yardstick of a world civilization which is still a hollow shell, would be greatly to impoverish them, draining away their life-blood and leaving nothing but the bare bones behind.

. . . The true contribution of a culture consists not in the list of inventions which it has personally produced, but in its difference from others. The sense of gratitude and respect which each single member of a given culture can and should feel towards all others can only be based on the conviction that the other cultures differ from his own in countless ways. . . .

We have taken the notion of world civilization as a sort of limiting concept or as an epitome of a highly complex process. If our arguments are valid, there is not, and never can be, a world civilization in the absolute sense in which that term is often used, since civilization implies, and indeed consists in, the coexistence of cultures exhibiting the maximum possible diversities. A world civilization could, in fact, represent no more than a worldwide coalition of cultures, each of which would preserve its own originality.

## RACE AND CULTURE<sup>2</sup>

[In 1952] in a booklet written for UNESCO, I suggested the concept of “coalition” to explain why isolated cultures could not hope to create single-handed the conditions necessary for a truly cumulative history. To achieve this, I said, different cultures must, voluntarily or involuntarily combine their respective stakes in the great game of history, to increase their chances of making that long run of winning plays by which history progresses. Geneticists are at present [1971] putting forward very similar views on biological evolution, in pointing out that a genome is in reality a system within which certain genes function as regulators and others act in concert on a single characteristic (or the contrary, if several characteristics depend on a single gene). What is true of the individual genome is also true of a population, in which the combination of a number of genetic inheritances—in which until recently a “racial type” would have been identified—must always be such as to allow the establishment of an optimum equilibrium and improve the group’s chances of survival. In this sense, it might be said that in the history of populations, genetic recombination plays a part comparable to that played by cultural recombination in the evolution of the ways of life, techniques, knowledge and beliefs by which different societies are distinguished. . . .

## THE NATURE-CULTURE DEBATE

[But] one fact cannot be too strongly emphasized: while selection makes it possible for living species to adapt to their natural environment or to resist its changes more effectively, in the case of man this environment ceases to be natural in any real sense. Its characteristics arise from technical, economic, social and psychological conditions which, through the operation of culture, create a particular environment for each human group. We can go a step further, and

consider whether the relation between organic evolution and cultural evolution is not merely analogical, but also complementary. . . .

In the dawn of humanity, biological evolution perhaps selected such pre-cultural traits as upright posture, manual dexterity, sociability, the capacity to think in symbols, speech and the ability to communicate. But once a culture existed, these traits were consolidated and propagated by cultural factors. When cultures became specialized, it was again cultural factors which consolidated and encouraged other traits, such as resistance to heat or cold for those societies which had willy-nilly to adapt themselves to extreme climatic conditions; aggressive or contemplative dispositions, technical ingenuity etc. None of these traits, as perceived at a cultural level, can clearly be attributed to a genetic basis, although we cannot exclude the possibility that such a connexion—even if partial, remote and indirect—may sometimes exist. In that case, it would be true to say that every culture selects genetic aptitudes which then, by reflex action, influence those cultures by which they were at first stimulated.

#### AN IDEOLOGICAL COVER

By pushing back the earliest beginnings of humanity to an ever more remote past—according to recent estimates, some millions of years ago—physical anthropology has undermined one of the principal bases for racialist theory, since the number of unknowable factors concerned thus increases much more rapidly than the number of landmarks available to stake out the paths followed by our earliest ancestors in the course of their evolution.

Geneticists delivered even more decisive blows to these theories when they replaced the concept of type by that of population and the concept of race by that of the genetic stock, and again when they demonstrated that there is a gulf between hereditary differences attributable

to a single gene—which are of little significance from the point of view of race, since they probably always have an adaptive value—and those attributable to the combined action of several, which makes it virtually impossible to determine them. . . .

Only in the last ten years have we begun to understand that we were discussing the problem of the relation between organic and cultural evolution in terms which Auguste Comte would have described as metaphysical. Human evolution is not a by-product of biological evolution, but neither is it completely distinct from it. A synthesis of these two traditional points of view is now possible, provided that biologists are not content with answers not based on fact, or with dogmatic explanations, and realize both the help they can give each other and their respective limitations.

The unsatisfactory nature of the traditional solutions to the problem perhaps explains why the ideological struggle against racialism has proved so ineffective on a practical level. There is nothing to indicate that racial prejudice is declining and plenty of evidence to suggest that, after brief periods of localized quiescence, it is reappearing everywhere with increased intensity. It is for this reason that UNESCO feels called upon to renew from time to time a battle whose outcome appears uncertain, to say the least.

But can we be so sure that the racial form taken by intolerance results primarily from false beliefs held by this or that people about the dependence of culture on organic evolution? Are these ideas not simply an ideological cover for a more real form of antagonism, based on the will to subjugate and on relations of power? This was certainly the case in the past, but, even supposing that these relations of power become less marked, will not racial differentiation continue to serve as a pretext for the growing difficulty of living together, unconsciously felt by mankind, which is undergoing a demographic explosion and

which . . . is beginning to hate itself, warned by a mysterious prescience that its numbers are becoming too great for all its members to enjoy freely open space and pure, non-polluted air?

Racial prejudice is at its most intense when it concerns human groups confined to a territory so cramped and a share of natural resources so meager that these peoples lack dignity in their own eyes as well as in those of their more powerful neighbours. But does not humanity today, on the whole, tend to expropriate itself and, on a planet that has grown too small, reconstitute, to its own cost, a situation comparable to that inflicted by some of its representatives on the unfortunate American or Oceanic tribes? Finally, what would happen to the ideological struggle against racial prejudice, if it were shown to be universally true—as some experiments conducted by psychologists suggest—that if subjects of any origin whatever are divided into groups, which are placed in a competitive situation, each group will develop feelings of bias and injustice towards its rivals?

Minority groups appearing in various parts of the world today, such as the hippies, are not distinguished from the bulk of the population by race, but only by their way of life, morality, hair style and dress; are the feelings of repugnance and sometimes hostility they inspire in most of their fellows substantially different from racial hatred? Would we therefore be making genuine progress if we confined ourselves to dissipating the particular prejudices on which racial hatred—in the strict sense of the term—can be said to be based?

#### THE MIRAGE OF UNIVERSAL ENTENTE

In any case, the contribution ethnologists can make to the solution of the race problem would be derisory; nor is it certain that psychologists and educators could do any better, so strong is the evidence—as we see from the

evidence of the so-called primitive peoples—that mutual tolerance presupposes two conditions which in contemporary society are further than ever from being realized: one is relative quality; the other is adequate physical separation. . . .

No doubt we cherish the hope that one day equality and fraternity will reign among men without impairing their diversity. But if humanity is not to resign itself to becoming a sterile consumer of the values it created in the past and of those alone . . . , it will have to relearn the fact that all true creation implies a certain deafness to outside values, even to the extent of rejecting or denying them. For one individual cannot at the same time merge into the spirit of another, identify with another and still maintain his own identity. Integral communication with another, if fully realized, sooner or later dooms the creative originality of both. The great creative epochs in history were those in which communication had become adequate for distance individuals to stimulate each other, but not frequent or rapid enough for those obstacles, indispensable between groups, to be reduced to the point at which diversity becomes leveled out and nullified by excessively facile interchange.

Convinced that cultural and organic evolution are inextricably linked, [biologists and ethnologists] know, of course, that a return to the past is impossible, but they know, too, that the course humanity is at present following is building up tensions to such a degree that racial hatred is a mere foretaste of the greater intolerance that may hold sway tomorrow, without even the pretext of ethnic differences. To forestall the dangers threatening us today and those, still more formidable, that we shall have to face tomorrow, we must accept mere ignorance or prejudice; we can only hope for a change in the course of history, which is even more difficult to bring about than progress in the march of ideas.