

Opening address for the Conference of European Historians of Brazil, Musée du Quai Branly, September 18, 2019.

Monsieur le directeur, colleagues and friends,

I am very honored to be opening the Conference of European Historians of Brazil, here in this particular place and at this particular time. Indeed, the place in which we are gathered accounts in no small measure for my presence here today, being no specialist of Brazilian history. The Claude Lévi-Strauss Amphitheater invites us to reflect on those whose intellectual life, and whose lives as a whole, have been shaped by Brazil — yours, that of Claude Lévi-Strauss and mine as a consequence, and indeed those of many of Europe’s social scientists, especially in France, which as Jacques Revel pointed out in 1978 has never ceased to be “fascinated” and “challenged” by the Latin-American continent. Let me briefly sketch out for you this “reasoned predilection”, in three moments that resonate with Levi-Strauss’s experience, as well as with French and European historiography, which, through intellectual ambition, has enlisted a wide array of disciplines — anthropology certainly, but also geography, economics and demography.

This Latin-American century in the social sciences brings us to 2019, almost exactly 90 years after Lucien Febvre, in a long note published in a 1929 issue of *Annales*, identified the Latin-American continent as a “privileged field of study”, providing a particularly fertile “terrain for experiment and comparison”, since it had, according to Febvre, remained isolated from Europe while at the same time constituting, as a result of its colonial experience, a kind of cultural graft of European history — or, in other words, one of Europe’s variants. The year 1948 marked a second moment in the development of this predilection, with the publication of an entire issue of the *Annales* focused on

South America — and largely on Brazil. The point was still to take the measure of the “American difference”, but given the European situation at the time, the perspective had changed: shaken to the core by the cataclysm of the Second World War, Europe was seeking a mirror in the New World that would allow it to recover an identity that was proving elusive as well as to contain its gnawing anxieties. The Latin America that many of the contributors had known in the 1930s was to be enlisted in the cause of helping them better understand themselves as Europeans.

And so what about Brazil today, after the Brazil-as-laboratory and Brazil-as-mirror phases? Drawing on Lévi-Strauss, I would like to try to make explicit something that our intuition and sensibilities have already alerted us to, alerted *you* most of all, and no doubt more painfully, as lovers and connoisseurs of this country: After a few no doubt falsely euphoric years in the early 21st century, Brazil now represents a condensation of everything that threatens humanity over the short and the medium term, and at the same time, of what may still perhaps allow it to escape this monstrous logic. The knowledge of catastrophe that is so much a part of anthropology, at least of anthropology as practiced by Lévi-Strauss, is now represented by native peoples who appear to us more clearly as what they are: survivors. It is thus that the “journey up the Amazon” should be followed, and brought to its conclusion, by a “journey up the Seine” — a journey that leads us here, to the Quai Branly, the final destination of many of the Amerindian artefacts collected by Lévi-Strauss, which the destruction by fire of the *Museo Nacional* last year has transformed into the ultimate witnesses of this life that is of direct concern to us, Europeans, since we are now, as Lévi-Strauss put it in 2005, “all Amerindians”.

Of that early epistemological moment of European Brazil, Claude Lévi-Strauss was both a witness and a protagonist, playing a role in the saga of the foundation of the University of Sao Paulo from 1934. Now a sort of heritage site of France in Brazil, the USP has recently been the focus of detailed and fascinating studies by historians of anthropology in Brazil, returning to this moment that has long resisted interpretation. Indeed, it would be too easy to reduce the entire USP adventure to a flawed enterprise! Flawed on the French side, as it struggled to conceal its “cultural imperialism” under the guise of “francophone development” or “francophilia”, which was, to be sure, a characteristic of Latin-American elites in the early 20th century; and flawed on the Brazilian side as well, as it served the desire for revenge of increasingly sidelined Sao Paulo liberal elites — who were to be entirely marginalized a few years later with the rise to power of Vargas and the *Estado Novo*. In the end, the two main protagonists in this story are two of the losers of contemporary history: French-speaking Latin America is no longer; and the Sao Paulo bourgeoisie, which Lévi-Strauss gently mocked in a few famous pages of *Tristes Tropiques*, has also disappeared without a trace. Contrary to how a few naive souls would have it, cultural imperialism does not in the end fully capture what the USP was all about, though it might well have started out that way. From these two flawed endeavors emerged a fascinating story of “quid pro quo”, one that can be seen reflected in the careers of Lévi-Strauss, Fernand Braudel, Roger Bastide and Pierre Monbeig, to name but a few.

Fernand Braudel once mysteriously proclaimed that Brazil had made him “intelligent”.¹ Does Brazil make you smarter? All those I am now going to talk about, who were probably no dummies in the first place, would most likely have subscribed to this statement. All these young researchers, Lévi-Strauss first and foremost, had their sensory antennae keenly attuned to the Brazilian world, which they gradually discovered in Sao Paulo and its environs, enthusiastically

¹ F. Braudel, *L'histoire au quotidien*

exploring with an eager gaze, often accompanied by their wives, the geomorphology of the Matto Grosso, the Atlantic forest of Sierra XXX, and the “sociological ballet” of Sao Paulo elites. But, right from the start, the intuition was there: Brazil was not so much a new object of study as a theoretical field, a sort of open-air laboratory. In it they were very happy to find the “unique experimental field offered by the New World”. Hailing from different disciplines and backgrounds, they all aspired to do rigorous fieldwork that would allow them to found, or found anew, a living human science. For, contrary to the logic that presided over their missions, as defined by the cultural service of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they did not come to South America as “ambassadors of French culture”, but rather as young scientific researchers in the making, ready to teach but, more importantly, to learn.²

A philosopher by training, Lévi-Strauss was captivated by Brazilian society, its patterns of urban development, its out-sized scale, the violence of its metamorphoses — whether it be the cycles of coffee capitalism, or that of the rubber plant harvested by *seringueiros* — all of which he observed with keen attention to what was emerging and what was disappearing. Sao Paulo was changing at an exhilarating pace. This afforded opportunities for the budding social scientist, who could observe large-scale processes which in Europe had unfolded over centuries: “Sao Paulo is considered an ugly city, but I find it extraordinarily appealing, in all its disorder and incoherence. It is the ‘urban phenomenon’ in pure form, and it is possible, while roaming its neighborhoods, to find all the stages of city dwelling, from mud huts to the most North American of skyscrapers. From a sociological point of view, it offers a magnificent experience. The study of the city, the analysis of its growth and arrested development, the spatial configuration of its professions and nationalities form the very basis of my teaching,” he wrote in a letter to Marcel Mauss. And a most experimental kind of teaching it was: Lévi-Strauss would

² C. Charle, “Ambassadeurs de la culture française vs chercheurs”

send his students into the streets and byways of Sao Paulo to observe its transformations *in situ*. We see in Lévi-Strauss the abiding interest of French sociology in “social morphology”, in how societies are organized and how that organization manifests itself spatially. The spatial orientation of the French social sciences, which very early on included geography as one of its most eminent disciplines, was also reflected in the shared interests of Lévi-Strauss — then still deprived of Amerindians — and the geographer Pierre Monbeig. Lévi-Strauss accompanied Monbeig on trips west of Sao Paulo and north of Parana, during which they traced the paths of the pioneers through “nomadic landscapes” comprised of forest clearings and railways, interspersed with proto-cities — Londrina the eldest, Nova Dantzig, Rôlandia, Araçatuba. In this pioneer Brazil, European migrants were plunged back into the toponymy and “burnt smell” of the forest clearing. Here again, Lévi-Strauss was stunned to observe the emergence of the urban, with its perpendicular axes, its specialized functions (commercial on one side, administrative on the other) — which he saw as the “ultimate human phenomenon”.

The popular folklore he discovered with and through Mario de Andrade, and which Dina Lévi-Strauss filmed with a camera provided by the Departamento de Cultura, reminds us that this founding moment was also one of great Brazilian friendships — intermediaries vis-à-vis the unknown. Indeed, the Europeans were not alone in this Brazilian laboratory. Lévi-Strauss, otherwise not lavish with his friendships, remembered these fondly for the rest of his long life.

For the modernist historians, like Braudel, Brazil functioned differently: not as a photographic developing bath that revealed emergent processes to the naked eye, but as a possible version of globalization that, at various periods, had integrated into the European orbit worlds that did not belong to it — Brazil in the 16th century, Algeria in the 19th. Braudel had just spent ten years in Algeria when he arrived in Sao Paulo, with thousands of note cards for his dissertation

in tow. It is even said that a second hotel room had to be rented to store his research material! Surrounded by young Brazilian historians, such as Caio Prado Jr of the Instituto historico e geografico brasileiro, Braudel sought to understand the different ways in which European economic and social history had taken root in the two countries, one a “young” nation and the other a colony. The migrations triggered by Brazil’s economic boom, its urban growth, the construction of its transportation infrastructure — all of these Brazilian realities were taken up through a triangulation with Algeria, a semi-colonial space. In *The Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II*, Braudel grasped the emerging importance of the transatlantic trade. In the same way, Lévi Strauss, ostensibly a specialist of the Amerindian peoples of South America, used only part of his fieldwork data in his dissertation on *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949). The structuralist paradigm only crystalized later, during his exile in New York, under the influence of Jakobson’s linguistics and American libraries, which provided a gateway into the Amerindians of North America. While the object of passionate interest, Brazil was for neither of them an element of binary comparison, but rather part of triangular processes that operated, as Lévi-Strauss was later to do with Amerindian myths, through differentials, “transformations” between cosmogonies, the various ways in which European history took root on the Latin-American continent — this applied to economic history as well as to values and religious models, whether Christinanity or Comtian positivism, that had been so strangely and successfully transplanted to Brazil! Lucien Febvre had sensed this very clearly and formulated it in the words of his time: “The issues raised for our respective fields and curious minds by this continent so full of a yet untamed vitality are interesting, and worthy of our full attention, primarily insofar as they have analogs elsewhere.” All these men of learning, historians and anthropologists alike, were in the process of elaborating a new comparative paradigm, and Brazil clearly represented a decisive step in its

formulation. Brazil thus made one “intelligent” because it allowed one to think differently, at a different scale.

After 1945, the New World was no longer quite the happy hive where “swarms from old Europe” had come to nest — older than ever, Europe was emerging from a disaster whose depths are still being sounded today. Lucien Febvre, now bereft of Marc Bloch who had been killed by the Nazis, tried to draw all the consequences of the new state of affairs, first by recording it: “For the world, our world, is in doubt, groping. Entering a period of grave trembling and painful fumbling, punctuated by bouts of great ardor, and major falls as well. Sprinkling didactic explanations like holy water on this devastated landscape would be to condemn oneself and others to understanding nothing of the drama that is playing out before our eyes.” This quest for understanding is what Febvre began to undertake when he developed a course on “European Civilization” at the Collège de France in 1944-45, which was followed by many publications and reflections — some within the framework of the newly created UNESCO founded in 1949, in which he was a dynamic, though often frustrated, actor. The 1948 issue of *Annales* must thus be placed in its moral, institutional and political context: the baby steps of European construction. South America, in all its abundance and potentiality, was in the eyes of the historian a fabulous time machine, an observation post that “sheds light on so many obscure aspects of the European past”. Who are we? Where do we come from? Marc Bloch had casually dismissed the “chimera of origins”, yet the post-war journey to Latin America reactivated it as a desirable fantasy: “The history of the Americas is nothing less than a great living history book, perpetually open, in two volumes, across the Atlantic, to help us understand ourselves.” The American mirror was solicited to identify that of which Europe was the name — because it had knowledge of the origins, but also because it revealed a common history. Historians of the new and old worlds shared the Atlantic: the history of South

America, continued Febvre, is "... a history that is part and parcel of our national histories, but still more of our cultural history. A history of comings and goings, of quid pro quo, of loans and refused loans, of one-way ventures and returns with compound interest." This precocious agenda of transnational, and more specifically transatlantic, history was a way to master and contain the turmoil of the present, and to give shape to a new scholarly internationalism. In 1949, Lucien Febvre himself traveled to South America, and particularly to Brazil, where he visited many cities and met with Gilberto Freyre in Recife. In Rio, he penned the essay "Toward Another History" as if looking at Europe from a distance allowed him to think through its deeper meaning. Being European, he wrote, is to feel a certain historicity, to experience a "hot" relationship to time, to be intoxicated by the "heady brew" of human evolution; whereas "young" societies were forgetful of their past, old societies were respectful of theirs and keen to preserve it; in modern European societies, people felt themselves to be the proud heirs of their achievements rather than of their ancestors. And, at the same time, these societies were buckling under the weight of past experience, which can sometimes prove fatal. Professional historians, in these societies, must thus fulfil the civic role of organizing the relationship between past and present, so as to stand firm against "the irresistible pressure for the dead to crush the living". This meditation on time was accompanied by a meditation on space — American space. The American space as a vivid expression of the American difference, a difference that became palpable on the ship during these long transatlantic crossings — sensory airlocks whose anthropology has yet to be written and whose proper role in the intellectual history of the century remains to be assessed. In any event, it was indeed on one of these ships, returning from Brazil in 1937, that Lucien Febvre met Fernand Braudel for the first time. A decade later, in 1949, Lucien Febvre was still advising the young historians of Europe to go to Latin America for a dose of fresh air: "These young people, somewhat weary from their joyless

mastications, from their predictable ruminations on Western histories, must be told: ‘Go there. Open your eyes. Let the present, the explanation of your own past, come to you. Do not read too much. Observe a lot. Try to make sense of it. By extending. By transposing.’” As we have seen, Lucien Febvre met with Gilberto Freyre. Later, in the 1950s, after his book had been translated into French by Roger Bastide, Freyre received a warm welcome in France. But at that time, in 1949, had Febvre read him in Portuguese? He was probably at least familiar with the laudatory review of *Casa-Grande et Senzala* Fernand Braudel had written in 1943, while a prisoner of war in Nazi Germany. Europeans in the throes of the race hatred of Nazi Europe were only too happy to adopt Gilberto Freyre’s vision of a harmonious Lusotropical intermixing. Lucien Febvre would even write the preface to the French edition: “Brazil, Land of History”. As if the failed history of Europe could be remedied and replayed anew in Brazil...

Let us leave the world of the social sciences to explore similar considerations surrounding a renowned Brazil refugee of the war years. As you all know, Stefan Zweig fled Nazi Austria, and then German-ruled Europe, into exile in Brazil in 1940, following an earlier visit in 1936. Exhausted, he still wrote two more books in the final years of his life — two books that stand like twin columns of the mantelpiece I am trying to construct here. *Brazil, Land of the Future* (1941), a paradoxical encomium for Vargas’s Brazil, which had opened its doors to him as it had to many European exiles and immigrants, welcoming him into a country that did not know racism and indeed promoted intermixing as a national value. At the same time, Zweig’s relative isolation allowed him to engage in a “reflexive examination” of his own Europeanness, and to write, from a distance, Europe’s great Odyssey. It was thus in Petropolis, on the heights of Rio, that he wrote his *Memories of a European*, which remains to this day one of the most searing accounts of the 20th century’s entry into an era of catastrophe, and which resurrected, without idealization, the “world of yesterday” — that stable, peaceful, prosperous world of 19th-century Europe

which, according to Zweig, had foundered in 1914, and definitively perished in 1939. The writer took his own life in 1942. It was thus, ironically, with his Brazilian opus that his bibliography came to an end — at least temporarily, until the posthumous publication of *The World of Yesterday: Memories of a European*.

The expression “Brazil, land of the future” was itself full of promise and used in various ways over the second half of the 20th century. In 1954, Charles Morazé, a historian close to Febvre, brought things full circle in *Les Trois âges du Brésil*: “Yesterday’s Europe accounts for today’s Brazil, and tomorrow’s Brazil might very well offer an outline of the Europe of the day after.” After it had served as the ground from which to question European temporalities, Brazil was now, in all its clashing forms (skyscrapers adjacent herds of goats), catching up with Europe, and perhaps skipping a few stages along the way. What Morazé, in his banal evolutionism, still conceived of in optimistic terms (Brazil as a new major power to be reckoned with) has taken on a quite different meaning today. Indeed, if Brazil has rejoined the “rhythm of the world”, this is perhaps not for the better. If Brazil heralds the future of Europe, it is less through the predictability of planning than in that superstitious way the queen of spades portends trouble ahead in psychic readings. Compounding various crises, at multiple scales — with its apparently uncontrollable urban metastases and the destruction of its ecosystems — Brazil appears to be at the avant-garde of a history that is truly un-hinged.

Some Brazilian colleagues recently asked me if I had a digital version of a photograph that had been lost, along with many others, in the fire of the *Museo Nacional*: Heloisa Alberto Torres, with to her left an elegantly appointed Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ruth Landes, a young Columbia University anthropologist, Charles Wagley, and Luiz de Castro Faria. A wonderful snapshot of Franco-American-Brazilian anthropology, over which Brazil rightfully presided in the form of the fastidious and matriarchal presence of Donna Heloisa, whom I have

nicknamed the “godmother” of anthropological expedition in Brazil. Yes, I did have it, and it was with a profound sense of gratitude that I sent this image across the Atlantic to the institution that had first given it to me. Yet again, a story of quid pro quo. Perhaps tropical trees from Brazil will serve to restore the timber work of Notre Dame? In this tempest we call “progress”, to borrow Walter Benjamin’s metaphor, we must now emancipate ourselves, loosen the knot of time and aerate our minds, yet again through a voyage across space which is also another conception of time. Brazil is at the forefront because it contains within it this problematic beating heart: the presence at its very core of Amerindians — those peoples on which Lévi-Strauss focused, sensing, rightly as we now know, that they were the vestiges, the remains of vaster and more prosperous societies that had ranged over the Amazonian lowlands. This journey “up the Amazon” in which European and Brazilian anthropologists (Philippe Descola, Ann-Christine Taylor, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro) have engaged over the past two decades has had a profound theoretical impact on all the social sciences of colonial encounter, through the idea that anthropological science and native praxis share the same epistemological status and, indeed, constitute variants of one another. Anne-Christine Taylor has demonstrated how Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism fundamentally derived from the “Indianization” of his scholarly mind — he himself would talk of the Bororos as spontaneous structuralists. Brazil then ceases to serve as a laboratory or a mirror, and becomes, rather, a springboard from which we can all dive into the cooling waters of the Rio Papagaio. It is not just the anthropology of the Americas but all of Western philosophy that stands to be renewed by native metaphysics. Therein lies the intellectual and political challenge of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s entire anthropological project and that of all those who, in this respect, are his heirs. And whether conscious or not, they are legion. For the figure of the Amerindian has now been raised to a tragic and profoundly contemporary status: reduced to groups of survivors roaming the bush, as if after a nuclear

apocalypse, the Amerindian would seem a harbinger of one of our possible futures. Here again, a story of quid pro quo, for those who paid the price for the development of the West are indeed those wretched men and women that Lévi-Strauss described with such affection in *Tristes Tropiques*. Replying to Sartre's famous phrase, "Hell is other people" with the much more subversive "Hell is ourselves", Claude Lévi-Strauss lived long enough to see many of the causes he championed after his encounter with Amerindians unfortunately vindicated: the science of disaster involves first and foremost identifying the human cause of it, whether it be demographic explosion, disengagement from nature, the restriction of vital space. If we are today so sensitive to the fate of Amerindians, if so many Brazilians have realized — and the rest of the world with them — how exemplary their existence is, it is, says the anthropologist, because, "expropriated from our culture, dispossessed of the values we held dear — the purity of water and air, the grace of nature, the diversity of animal and plant species — we are all Indians now, doing to ourselves that which we have done to others." Lévi-Strauss's Jewishness may well have played a part in his reasoning: public awareness regarding the fate of Amerindians has a single origin — we know, however confusedly, that "we are next on the list". Amerindians, however distraught and diminished they might be, have survived their own catastrophe, i.e. encounter with Europeans under the fatally asymmetrical conditions of the 16th century. In the speech he delivered upon receiving the Erasmus Prize in Amsterdam in 1974, Lévi-Strauss emphasized the political relevance of anthropology: there is much to be learned from the victims. Anthropologists are charged with "collecting the lessons of a wisdom from which the West might take inspiration..." This journey up the Amazon thus logically led to a journey up the Seine, which did indeed take place in the fall of 1989, exactly thirty years ago.

I will conclude with a photograph: it depicts CLS going up the Seine to Paris, aboard a dugout canoe with Haida paddlers from British Columbia. This

was in the fall of 1989, on the occasion of the exhibition “Claude Lévi-Strauss’s Americas” that was held at the Musée de l’Homme. The 18-meter long red cedar canoe had been carved by a Canadian Amerindian artist, Bill Reid, a symbol of the ancient native art of the Pacific North West that art museums and galleries in the Western world now recognize as among the most important. It traveled up the Seine river from Rouen to Paris, where the anthropologist joined them before they were all received at Paris City Hall by Jacques Chirac, the then mayor of Paris. Imagine the scene — the press covered parts of it. For six days, the regular lapping-sound of the paddles, the landscapes of Normandy then of the Ile-de-France flowing past these Amerindian bodies; on the riverbanks, French kids wearing feather headdresses shouting: “The Indians are coming! The Indians are coming!”; and, finally, the incongruous arrival in a late-20th-century Western city. The political force of this spectacle, in which Lévi-Strauss graciously agreed to take part, resides in the slow journey into the past it depicted, symbolically reversing the terms of discovery, since this time, the Indians had come to the Whites. The disastrous encounter of the 16th century — for Lévi-Strauss the inaugural moment of the cataclysm of modernity, i.e. the so called “discovery of America” — was re-enacted in reverse. What was done could be undone, the past returned to a present that had the potential for redemption. The becoming-Indian of humanity could be for the better rather than for the worse. This Lévi-Straussian fable engages much of our work to come — we historians, geographers, sociologists, and anthropologists, from old worlds and new — with regard to our objects of study certainly, but above all to our approaches and the form we give those objects; with regard to the character of a scholarly debate in which the partners are made equal by a common awareness of our very great fragility.

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