



Lévy-Bruhl and the Problem of Contradiction

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Lévy-Bruhl has a bad reputation. Beyond what is needed to dismiss it and indignantly condemn such concepts as that of primitive mentality, very little is in general known about his work. Frédéric Keck revisits this case of ostracism, revealing the paradoxical posterity of this philosopher turned anthropologist.

Under review: Frédéric Keck, *Lévy-Bruhl, Entre philosophie et anthropologie*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2008, 270 p., 35€.

As a thinker who has no heirs and belongs to no school, Lévy-Bruhl's influence over the three main philosophical currents of the twentieth-century – analytical philosophy, phenomenology and structuralism – is gauged by the need each of them has felt to ward off the idea of a form of thought that excluded the principle of non-contradiction. The case that supplied the point of departure for Lévy-Bruhl's thought was borrowed from anthropologist Karl Von den Steinen, who reported that the members of a Brazilian tribe, the Borono, claimed to be *araras* (a type of parrot). However, to be at once human and non-human violates the most fundamental principle of logic. It was in order to describe this phenomenon that Lévy-Bruhl called upon the *law of participation*, which he identified as the central principle of the primitive mentality.

Starting with this example, Frédéric Keck shows that the problem raised by Lévy-Bruhl offers a panoramic view of contemporary thought. In analytic philosophy, Quine's principle of charity could thus be understood as a means for reducing the contradictory utterances upon which Lévy-Bruhl built his case to mere errors of translation. If phenomenology proved more receptive to the concept of a pre-logical mind, it is because it saw it as an instrument for describing the "naïve" experience of the perceptible world independently of the intellectual frameworks that science imposes on our perception. But by subordinating this "practical logic" to a putatively superior theoretical logic, phenomenology lost sight of what made Lévy-Bruhl's investigation radical. The great strength of structuralism, for its part, was to prove that these apparently contradictory utterances became intelligible in the light of the ethnographic context from which Lévy-Bruhl had isolated them: if the Bororo boasted of being *araras*, it is not because they were unaware of the contradiction but rather because they wished to distinguish themselves from their neighbors, the Trumai, who identified with aquatic animals. While recognizing the fruitfulness of this analysis, Keck emphasizes that structuralism's focus on networks of semantic opposition prevented it from accounting for the syntax of the contradictory utterances that so fascinated Lévy-Bruhl.

Keck divides the work of Lévy-Bruhl into four periods, respectively corresponding to the concepts of the *primitive*, *mentality*, *participation* and *experience*. His approach to examining the concepts of *contradiction* and *participation* is thus simultaneously chronological and thematic.

A genealogy of the notion of mentality

The first chapter sheds light on the roots of the concept of the "primitive" in nineteenth-century French philosophy. Like Durkheim's early work, Keck shows that Lévy-Bruhl's dissertation, *L'Idée de responsabilité*, was in the tradition of the philosophy of Renouvier. Keck nevertheless emphasizes that the interest shown by Lévy-Bruhl in the formation of a simultaneously subjective and objective feeling of responsibility at the juncture of moral conscience and penal regulation distinguished his work from the

objectivist position that was to be adopted by Durkheim in *The Division of Labor in Society*.

The second part of the book offers a genealogy of the concept of mentality that is at once political and intellectual. This is first examined in the historical context of colonial policy: following the failure of the policy of assimilation, the concept of mentality was advanced in the framework of the new policy of association because it presented individuals as confined to mental structures they “could not claim to leave” (p.70). But the most surprising aspect of this chapter is probably the fact that it does not draw upon the works that Lévy-Bruhl specifically devoted to the notion of mentality. Instead, Keck seeks out this concept’s intellectual roots in the works of history and philosophy that Lévy-Bruhl published in the years 1880-1900. He thus emphasizes that the importance Lévy-Bruhl accorded to the diversity of modes of thought that characterized particular populations was at the confluence of two distinct philosophical traditions, that of the German Romantic philosophy deriving from Jacobi and Herder on the one hand, and the positivism of Comte on the other. Keck proceeds to consider the posterity of this concept in order to shed light on its shortcomings: by examining the uses to which the notion of mentality was put in psychology, with Piaget and Wallon, and history, among the members of the Annales school, he demonstrates that it is inseparable from “an implicit form of evolutionism” (p.124).

The experience of participation

Yet the essential contribution of Keck’s book consists in showing that the work of Lévy-Bruhl cannot be reduced to the universally disparaged notion of “primitive mentality”. In the third chapter, he thus chooses to come to grips with the works of anthropology that made Lévy-Bruhl famous by means of the concept of *participation*, insisting that the latter must not be understood in negative terms as a state of intellectual confusion but rather positively as an attempt to rehabilitate the place of emotions in mental life. Even as he followed in the footsteps of Ribot, who sought to define a form of *vital logic* that would not be purely intellectual, Lévy-Bruhl reproached him for not having taken into consideration the role of *social factors* in the formation of primitive

representations. As Keck very nicely shows, it was this connection between the vital and the social that defined the originality of Lévy-Bruhl's position relative to that adopted by the two dominant figures of the time, Durkheim and Bergson.

In contrast to Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl did not concentrate on the collective representations that are enshrined in institutions: on the contrary, he wished to study how such representations were formed "in a field of perception that preceded the separation between the individual and the collective" (p.164). And while he relied on the Bergsonian analysis of perception in order to claim that such virtual elements as shadows and ghosts are an integral part of perception in the primitive mentality, he refused to adopt a metaphysical system of life that lost sight of the social dimension of mental life.

Yet it is his recourse to the malebranchiste theory of causality that best characterizes the original position occupied by Lévy-Bruhl on the frontier between philosophy and ethnology. With great finesse, Keck analyzes the manner in which he tweaked and twisted this philosophical theory in order to turn it into a tool of ethnographic description: where Malebranche claimed that it is impossible to conceive of mental causality without recourse to a divine first cause, Lévy-Bruhl maintained that the primitive mentality relates all natural events – and, in particular, unusual accidents – to supernatural causes. That is to say, it situates human life in a network of socially constituted invisible forces that give it meaning.

This surprising link shows that Lévy-Bruhl increasingly came to focus on the positive description of the experience of participation, pushing its opposition with conceptual thought to the background. The last chapter of Keck's work examines this attempt to describe in our language a form of experience that irremediably escapes it. Even as he explains how this radical approach proved capable of inspiring widespread interest in ethnological, philosophical and literary circles, Keck underscores the aporetic character of Lévy-Bruhl's last works, which seem to accumulate ethnographic data while renouncing any attempt at locating them in a theoretical framework that would inevitably betray their particular logic.

With this book, Keck has done more than clarify a decisive moment in the formation of French ethnology. He has also shown that anthropological inquiry into the diversity of modes of thought must not be understood as at odds with philosophy: in the case of Lévy-Bruhl, it was a way of challenging and “subverting” philosophical concepts (p. 256). Through the study of this “minor” figure (*ibid.*), Keck thus sketches a history of human sciences predicated on the construction of problems and the circulation of concepts among different fields of knowledge, not the accumulation of discoveries. In fact, what is interesting about the hybrid discourse developed by this historian of philosophy and latecomer to anthropology is less his positive contribution to one or the other of these disciplines than his ability to unsettle them both by “wiring” them into one another. Given the dead end to which Lévy-Bruhl’s thought ultimately led, however, the conditions in which the study of participation might once again become relevant for anthropology and philosophy remain to be defined.

Translated from french by Ethan Rundell

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