

Words and Matter. America and Europe

by Susan Carol Rogers

In his latest book, Emmanuel Désveaux proposes to combine the cultural (American) and structural (Levi-straussian) approaches to make sense of cultural differences between European and North American societies. Susan Carol Rogers responds by looking at the discipline's future and arguing that these two approaches are fundamentally incompatible.

Do such things as “mega-culture areas” exist?

Emmanuel Désveaux is dissatisfied with current trends in French anthropology and aims here to demonstrate a more productive style of analysis. Deeply committed to the Levi-Straussian structuralism that dominated French anthropology for much of the second half of the 20th century, he draws guidance from the work of the Master throughout this study. But he wants to build in a novel twist: consideration of the distinguishing characteristics of “mega-culture areas.” By this, he means such vast expanses as “Europe” (presumably considered equivalent to “The West” [*l'Occident*], frequently referred to in the text) or “America”. He accesses these through a series of case studies, each treated to his brand of structuralist analysis. A focus on gender distinctions/definitions runs through many of his cases.

For Désveaux, “America” means what US anthropologists usually call “Native North America” (although he includes one example from indigenous South America), and his case studies cover a geographically and culturally diverse selection of peoples: Iroquois (treated together with the Tupinambas of the Brazilian Amazon), Ojibwa (his own research specialty), Sioux, Yurok. His data are drawn from a variety of sources, including some ethnographic

studies conducted within the past fifty years. But he depends substantially on materials collected in the 19th or early 20th century by such titans of American anthropology as Lewis Henry Morgan, Clark Wissler, Alfred Kroeber, Edward Sapir, and Fred Eggan. In each of his American chapters, he considers a putatively timeless myth or ritual, linking his cases together through formal semantic analysis that aims to reveal logical connections among them. He identifies no ties to contemporary mainstream American society except for a somewhat unconvincing effort to connect the lyrics in Bob Dylan songs to *specifically* Indian themes (pp. 177-91). “I’m no historian”, he asserts (p. 12). Indeed: the temporal dimensions of this material are collapsed into a single, static “America”. So are its geographic and cultural distinctions.

If Désveaux’s America seems remarkably timeless and culturally expansive (within the bounds of a putatively pre-columbian Native North America), his “Europe” is strikingly narrow in terms of place and cultural tradition, while shifting between images of static archaism and location on an ever-moving timeline. His case studies are situated mainly in France: sometimes a rural France of timeless tradition (e.g. Savoyard traditional architecture; largely abandoned festive practices around Carnival, May Day, bull fighting) and sometimes a France lodged in historical processes that are apparently alarming or titillating to him. For example, in one chapter he ties shifting legal or technical arrangements in French family law (e.g. same-sex marriage, use of DNA tests to establish “real” paternity) to an analysis of the relationship between marriage and prostitution in “The West”. Another chapter about porn actresses draws largely on Mathieu Trachman’s data (2013); Désveaux, in an analysis full of shooting sperm and other creepy things, argues that “Western” pornography allows most women to occupy a possibly fictional asexual interstitial space. He does make some effort to move beyond the Hexagon: The chapter on bullfighting (drawing mainly on Frédéric Saumade’s work (1994)) includes data from Spain as well as southern France; the chapter relating the Trojan Horse story to the Perrault fairy tale of “Peau d’Ane” (Donkey skin) draws on presumably pan-European literary traditions. But generally, it seems that France (especially rural France in the old days) is, for Désveaux, a reasonable stand-in for Europe, itself understood as synonymous to “The West”.

In this juxtaposition of case studies selected from two continents, Désveaux demonstrates that each can be analyzed, following Levi-Strauss, in terms of semantic oppositions productive of meaning, drawn against a background of phenomenological codes or orders-of-things. But he aims to amend this approach by pointing to a significant contrast between the native American examples and those representing Europe with respect to how such codes are conceptualized. His formal analysis of the American semantic system, he asserts, reveals a plethora of mutable orders, such that movement between stars and plants, animals and humans, for example, is quite fluid. In contrast, he sees the European system as considerably more rigid and composed of fewer orders (mainly just material/immaterial). This contrast, somehow summarized in an opposition between a typically American emphasis on “word” [*parole*] and a quintessentially European focus on “matter” [*substance*] illustrates what

he means by mega-cultural distinctions. Incorporating these into conventional structural analysis, he argues, promises anthropological thought a salutary middle path between the pitfalls of excessive universalism on one hand and excessive cultural relativism, on the other (p. 304).

A culturalist-structuralist hybrid?

As an American-trained anthropologist who launched her research specialty in rural France in the early 1970s with an initial emphasis on gender studies, I found this book to call up much of what struck me as intriguing, aesthetically-pleasing, wrong-headed, and incomprehensible about French anthropology of the day. Written almost fifty years later, this work raises fascinating questions about persistent (cultural?) differences among our discipline's national traditions that seem well worth careful thought.

Désveaux's interest in finding a way to systematically grasp and deploy observable cultural differences between European and North American societies is one I have shared for decades (especially if we follow his—typically French? —lead in treating “European” and “French” as synonyms, but depart from his path by considering “American” to mean mainstream US society). At one obvious level, his line of argument might seem either strikingly arbitrary and arcane (why choose the particular tiny bits he does, or interpret them the way he has?) or else hopelessly self-evident (who would doubt that European and native American cultures are different from each other?). Taking another step back, though, his work suggests a potentially more productive approach to a comparative anthropology of America (US) and Europe (France). Taking our own discipline as a total social fact, what might we make of the observation that Levi-Straussian structuralism was never very widely embraced—or indeed much understood—by American anthropologists, even in its heyday? By the same token, what insights might we tease out of the fact that the “culture concept” has long been so central to American anthropology (even in recent years, as it became a favorite target of critique), yet generally has not been important to French anthropologists and in fact appears to remain opaque or irrelevant to many of them? Especially because we ostensibly share a discipline, might a systematic comparative analysis of these contrasting conceptual tools for understanding the human condition illuminate something about broader differences between the societies (cultures?) within which they have been considered especially meaningful and useful?

But Désveaux places his comparison elsewhere, trying to combine the two modes of inquiry to create a tool for understanding mega-cultural differences, with native America and Europe as an example. At risk of seeming hopelessly trapped in culturalist thinking, I would argue that the two approaches are fundamentally incompatible, each having its own strengths and limitations that illuminate some aspects of the human condition while leaving others in

the dark. A mash-up of the two risks losing the strengths of one approach and doubling the limitations of the other. For example, insofar as structuralist analysis ultimately aims to elucidate universal characteristics of human thought, it can successfully be undertaken through astute interpretation of apparently random bits of myth, ritual or habitual practice. Almost any ethnographic data of this kind—however arbitrary or arcane it might seem, or how frozen in time--can, with the proper treatment, be related to fundamental structures of human thought. But insofar as cultural analysis aims to identify and illuminate key particularities of a given culture (or significant forms of diversity among cultures), compelling results require that the data selected be more elaborately contextualized and treated with rather different rules of inference. Désveaux's work sometimes rises to the clever insights that structuralism promises, but it fails as cultural analysis: we never get much sense of the cultural dimensions (at least as I understand these) at play in any of his case studies, nor any compelling grasp of Native North American or European "mega-cultures", much less of the fundamental differences between them. Although his selection and handling of data is probably appropriate for orthodox structuralist treatment, it comes across as strikingly incoherent for the purposes of cultural analysis. He is not the first to land in this kind of pitfall. Attempts by American cultural anthropologists to bring formal structuralist methods (as they understood these) into their work yielded results that were, in their way, just as garbled (e.g. Ortner 1972). It is perhaps unclear whether 20th century structuralism has fully run its course, or whether sharp distinctions between American and French styles of anthropological inquiry are bound to persist. But in any case it seems to me that the prospects of a productive future for any kind of culturalist-structuralist hybrid are extremely slim.

There is ample room for debate on a number of other positions taken in this provocative book. Désveaux's diagnosis of anthropology's current ailments, for example, seems overstated; it is probably most intelligible by reference to internal debates among French anthropologists. His approach to gender and feminism often struck me as jarringly crude and idiosyncratic. And his work seems largely premised on the persistence of a Durkheimian *grand partage* distinguishing those "societies we called primitive until recently" (p. 163) from those more like our own, in terms of such characteristics as a greater salience of symbolism in everyday life (p. 137), greater cultural coherence (p. 163), stronger presence of myth and ritual, and lesser pertinence of history. This seems a surprising position today, although insofar as it is shared by many of Désveaux's colleagues, it might explain some of the on-going tensions among French anthropologists over whether certain (exotic?) societies are more amenable to "real" anthropological analysis than others.

On the contrary, it seems to me that symbolism, ritual, myth, cultural in/coherence, history all carry more or less similar weight around the globe, suggesting that anthropological inquiry can legitimately be undertaken virtually anywhere. It follows that the elaboration of contemporary tools for a comparative anthropology focused, for example, on America and Europe is undoubtedly a worthwhile pursuit (e.g. Raulin and Rogers 2015). Even if

Désveaux's approach itself falls short, this thought-provoking study should generate valuable ideas about ways to carve out our discipline's future.

A response to Susan Carol Rogers by Emmanuel Désveaux

It would be an understatement to say that Susan Carol Rogers was not overwhelmed when she read my book, *La Parole et la substance*. Accordingly, she wrote a comment that lists at least two major inaccuracies and that misses the core purpose of the book. The first inaccuracy has to do with my European examples. Rogers wrote that they belong “especially (to) rural France of the old days”. In fact, except the chapter on Savoyard traditional architecture, all my chapters on Europe address issues such as bullfights, carnivals, prostitution and marriage, or pornography. All of these seem to me rather alive and contemporary issues (and not especially either rural or French by the way). We shall see later what is the second error that she made. However, behind this first approximation, one can also easily decipher the common trial in “a-historicity” that most of today's anthropologists, on both sides of the Atlantic, are prompt to engage in. In the same vein, I am blamed for using only classical ethnographical sources on North American Indians, but also for not talking about the present situation of these groups, or worse, for persisting to abide by a style of (French structuralist) anthropology that fifty years ago was already “intriguing, aesthetically-pleasing, wrong-headed and incomprehensible”.

Let us see now why Rogers missed the core argument of the book. It appears to me that she keeps conflating two levels of discussion: the first one is about “great” paradigms, or methods, within anthropology — American culturalism versus French structuralism, as if every culturalist were American and every structuralist were French. The second level has to do with what a culture is and, more precisely, what its scale is. She postulates that structuralist analysis ought to be exclusively bound to “aim to universal characteristics of human thought” whereas culturalism “aims to identify and illuminate particularities of a given culture”. It is true that with such dogmatic (and quite old-fashioned) conceptions of either culturalism or structuralism, she had no chance of understanding what *La Parole et la Substance* is about. I am trying to use the tools of structural analysis to understand a given culture. But, for me, a culture spreads out to very large spaces, which could be more or less geographically extended to an entire continent. To be precise, in my book, two of them are initially juxtaposed, and finally contrasted as two different cultures: Native American and European. However, in her definition of culturalism, Rogers adds an element (in brackets): it also aims to understand “significant forms of diversity among cultures...” How? She does not explain this crucial point, not even in a few words. We are left in limbo here. Yet, this is exactly what I am trying to do: to show that the fundamentals of the Pan-American Native culture are radically different from European fundamentals. This attempt is carried out through a series of interrelated case studies rooted in each continent. In America, this connection relies on logical

transformations through space. It allows me to explain why Northern Californian vegetalism is the true opposite of Algonquian totemism, the first virtually ignored by the anthropological literature, contrary to the second that has been central to it for decades. In Europe, the logical transformations are more easily traced through time than through space, from matrimonial consent instituted in the Middle Ages to the current voluntary choice of some women to be porn actresses, from the traditional dowry to contemporary young women seeking to get a higher education exactly like their brothers or their future husband(s) (or more likely life partners in a period of disaffection for the institution of marriage). The structuralist path that I follow aims to reveal internal bonds within large-extended cultural areas, that in French I call “mega-aïres culturelles” because I take for granted that these spaces have been closed spaces in terms of cultural development for centuries, or even for millennia, and that each has time enough to “brew” its own superficial cultural diversity. Ultimately, this method has a heuristic value when it shows that the basic cultural or social assets are not the same from one continent to the next. In that sense — and this is the second major tampering with my thought in Rogers’ text —, I never abide by the Durkheimian great divide. For me, America is as different to Europe as it is to Australia or, probably, to Africa... This was precisely the main argument of my previous book.¹

It is clear that my anthropology differs profoundly from Rogers’. Structuralism and culturalism are not exclusive for me. Both are great, inspiring intellectual traditions. I do not need to preclude what each of them is fit for. My anthropological interest rises from oddities that deserve an explanation. Why did Californian Indians go barefoot when everywhere else North American Native people wore moccasins ? Why, on the Klamath river, could anyone ask the first man he met to ferry him across, even if he was his worst foe? Why did a Sioux warrior cradle the dead body of his infant for three years after his death ? Why were Iroquois women either inclined to welcome a captive as their son or to let their fellow countrymen torture him to death? Why in a society like our (Western) society, where the values of feminism are so strong and widespread, is pornography — which at first glance so dramatically illustrates male domination — largely tolerated and, even more so, pervasive? Why does the theme of prostitution become a public issue every time the institution of marriage is challenged? Why do Western women have a total dedication to cleanness? Why do Amerindian local cultures in fine so easily commute semantical elements although on the surface they appear so diverse? Why have Westerners basically been submitting to the same obsessions with sex and wealth for centuries? Do the Pueblo children, as Lévi-Strauss asserted in *Le Père Noël supplicié*, really expect a material gratification for delaying the hour of their own parents’ death as the Western children do at Christmas time? These are the kinds of questions that nourish my interest in anthropology. I personally do not care to know if I belong to such or such school or if these schools are reconcilable or not. My anthropology is

¹ E. Désveaux, *Avant le genre, Triptyque d’anthropologie hardcore*, Paris, Éditions de l’EHESS, 2013.

grounded in phenomenological curiosity. Curiosity means facing and naming the facts as they present themselves, instead of sticking to euphemisms. In that sense, I am not sure that curiosity is the main drive for someone who speaks of “sperm and other creepy things”. By the way, I am still wondering what Rogers had in mind when using the expression “other creepy things”. I guess our reader has to get the book and read it to figure out what she is talking about and more generally to form for himself or herself a better idea of its qualities and its weaknesses than the one that is to be drawn uniquely from Rogers’ unfair rendering of it.

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