

The isle of France

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ABSTRACT

The reading of this book follow the history of Structuralism exploring it from layers in which stands the subject fields, the educational institutions, the magazines, the characters and the works that come out in the fifties, shake the sixties and have repercussions until nowadays. Layers that certainly blend together, creating nodules, accumulation points, that make evident the historical nature of each paradigm whose perception of credibility is assured through statements caught from its main characters allowing them the necessary critical distance to evaluate and review their positions and, for the reader, to follow the ruptures, the inflexions, the refluxes and idiosyncrasies of this history.

Key words: structuralism, narration, history.

RESUMO

A leitura do texto acompanha a narrativa sobre a história do estruturalismo a partir de camadas em que se assentam os campos disciplinares, as instituições de ensino, as publicações, os personagens e as obras que despontam na década de 1950, sacodem os anos 60 e que repercutem até nossos dias. Camadas que certamente se imiscuem, criando nódulos, pontos de acumulação, que evidenciam o caráter histórico de todo paradigma cuja percepção de credibilidade é assegurada através de depoimentos que o autor colhe junto a inúmeros de seus protagonistas, permitindo-lhes o distanciamento crítico necessário para avaliar e rever suas posições, e, ao leitor, acompanhar as rupturas, as inflexões, os refluxos e as idiosincrasias dessa história.

Palavras chave: estruturalismo, narrativa, história.

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The isle of France

1. Divided into two volumes: *The Rising Sign* and *The Sign Sets*.

2. François Dosse interviewed more than hundred of intellectuals of which we mention here only a few: Augé, Ducrot, Dumézil, Greimas, Kristeva, Lefebvre, Lévi-Strauss, Martinet, Nora, Todorov, Touraine, Vernant and Wahl.

It is possible to read through the nearly thousand pages of the *History of structuralism*¹ with the same passion of a romance, even though the characters are here in a role of intellectuals whose theories are object of political and ideological arguments that lead them into a web of intrigue that often results in harmful actions. Such as a historical romance, maybe France is the main character in this narrative that will promote the dispute among the major paradigms of twentieth-century thought. Dispute that will show no winners at all, since, from the beginning, there was always a tension between sign and sense theories. Tension which is presented at Plato's *Cratilo*, as well as at Aristotle's grammar, that cross the Middle Ages with the *quarrel of universals*, reaches modernity with *Port-Royal*, and finds France that, in spite of sharing with Europe the effects of scientific revolutions, as well as the reason and the humanity values crisis at the postwar, it still remains as an island which lives its intellectual epopée observing the world through a narrow gap that separates it critically from the political events that take place in the field of socialist ideology – from Stalin's USSR to Mao's China – and the independence fights in its colonies. However, the symptom of a progressive disenchantment of the world in which Europe falls in postwar will have an ambiguous result. On the one hand, it will take refuge in the field of sign, in the interiority of the text, in the structures of the language, and in the invariants of the code; on the other hand, it will flirt with the historical meaning through the communist ideology, despite Hungary's soviet invasion in 1956, and Prague's springtime in 1968. However, such political approach is quite distant, since its focus on the figure of the Other, on the otherness, results in the possibility of repressing that subject who was supposed to carry the absolute values, the evident truths, as a master of the course of history.

The privilege of a historian is to tell the course of events in retrospective, and so François Dosse does at the *History of Structuralism*, exploring it from layers in which stands the subject fields, the educational institutions, the magazines, the characters and the works that come out in the fifties, shake the sixties and have repercussions until nowadays. Layers that certainly blend together, creating nodules, accumulation points, that make evident the historical nature of each paradigm whose perception of credibility is assured through statements caught from its main characters² allowing them the necessary critical distance to evaluate and review their positions and, for the reader, to follow the ruptures, the inflexions, the refluxes and idiosyncrasies of this history. After all, it is possible to get to the conclusion that the so-called structuralism was nothing more than an invention. In this sense, structuralism was a kind of a construction wherein epistemological arguments took place. Arguments that despite having a common program at

linguistics, considered as a “pilot science”³, could not exist as a unity if it was not generated in such country called France that, in spite of criticizing the Eurocentrism, went ahead with its Francocentrism.

The *Isle of France* lives by a time that will have on May 68 its peak and also its turning point. It is a moment when some words strengthen, others fade out. A movement needs to renew its lexicon. Consequently, categories such as subject and social class fade away in order to the entry of others supposed to be more critical such as cut, grid, apparel and concept. Metaphysics is substituted for ontology, consciousness for unconsciousness, transcendence for immanence, meaning for significance and the referent disappears in order to cause the field of sign. Similarly, those traditional subjects, such as History, Psychology and Arts, have their hierarchy contested, being replaced by others considered more critical: Anthropology, Psychoanalyze, and Linguistics. Among this scenario, philosophy is threatened by structuralism in its will to establish the humanities field. However, in order to keep its majesty, philosophy makes way towards structuralist territory absorbing its conceptual contribution, not to line up with its classification, but to renew and to enrich the philosophers’ territory. And philosophy achieves its aims. Not just because many of intellectuals that follow structuralism have their formal education in philosophy, but also because they knew – and nobody like Foucault! – how to lead it through the humors and annoyances within each time introduces itself, making possible to set its ideas up and, at the end, sell them as hotcakes. What is at stake in the middle of twentieth-century is the argument between two major paradigms: one represented by the philosophical tradition, castled on the conservative Sorbonne whose icon is Sartre, and another that introduces itself as critical enough to oppose both Marxism (Hegelian) and phenomenology⁴ by proposing a scientific method that allows to humanities its consolidation as an autonomy field of knowledge.

In order to establish the subject fields, at first kept away from the university, the reward is the creation of departments – and budgets – to professors of this new generation that, after May 68, will have assured their proper academic prestige, even though the results on a theoretical level are ambiguous since structuralism will face a reflux as their premises are queried. The profitable in such dispute involving these subject fields is the socialization of knowledge, breaking the limits off, allowing that specialists of several areas work towards common projects and that authors and theories join in a dynamics of influences and appropriation not even confessed. Therefore, Nietzsche will affect Foucault, the trace of Heidegger will inform Derrida and his concept of *ek-sistence* will shape Lacan. Kristeva will introduce Bakhtin to France, but she will be taken by Derrida’s deconstructivism and Lacan’s psychoanalysis. Lacan in turn will breathe new life into Freud’s works, as Derrida will take advantage of him to construct his concept of *différance*. Barthes will be seduced by Japan where he will find the sign freed from its meaning.

3. Linguistics as a “pilot science” is furthermore what characterizes the structuralist ambition since it situates language beyond its own field of analysis (the tongue) and below its metaphysical purposes, assigning the function of a logical-conceptual device to be applied to humanities.

4. Although structuralism opposes both phenomenology and Marxism, such philosophical theories are in fact those that sustain its speculative incursions, as we can respectively notice on Derrida’s and Althusser’s works.

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The isle of France

Spread over this net of appropriation, structuralism appears as a history of encounters with Paris as a passing place. Encounters between Kristeva and Barthes, but, after all, between French intellectuals and the Russian post-formalism that she makes possible by introducing into structuralism a historical dynamics, coming out of the text closure, extending intelligibility to the literary texts by an *intertextuality* which will also replace the subject, even though anonymous, into semiotic field. Such encounters also result in favors and since Foucault – supported by Hyppolite, Dumézil, Vuillemin and Braudel – is successful in publishing *Les mots et les choses*, he will find no difficulty to win the seat from Ricouer at Collège de France, where Lévi-Strauss was already. Strengthened, is Foucault who will side with Barthes, as much Dumézil and Lévi-Strauss will do concerning to Vernant. In such history of encounters, universities and party politics break all lines, mainly at Vincennes where courses are assembled post-haste and employments are made to favor friends, not skills or professional competencies. In addition, magazines⁵ are used for spreading the subject fields as well as vehicles for ideological propaganda of political parties, swinging from Marxism-Leninism – as *La Nouvelle Critique*, connected with FCP – to Maoism – as the polemical and vanguardist *Tel Quel*.

Structuralism is also a history of chances and misunderstandings and May 68 is probably the major one. On the one hand, it means the top of a critical thinking which tends to dissuade tradition confined at Sorbonne getting to it some fresh air with new ideas, on the other hand, the students' revolt oddly denies the structuralism's premise that announces the end of subject in favor of a formal logic that despises the diachronic axis. After all, the structuralist program definitely refuses the humanism and its epistemological categories which, anchored in the supremacy of reason, try to provide intelligibility to reality. Therefore, it proclaims with Foucault "the death of the subject", with Barthes, "the author's death" and, with Derrida, "the scripture urgency". Everything must be done in the name of anonymity. However, such forgetfulness of subject will cause a fissure in structuralism paradigm from 1966 on, when it was at its apogee. Besides the Chomsky's generativism, that compels him to a cognitive science, and Derrida's deconstructionism that radicalizes him into a void opaque to meaning (despite having inserted on it a temporal dimension), Benveniste also contributes to structuralism crisis by restoring the subject with his enunciation theory, trying to bring French intellectuals closer to Austin pragmatics just in a moment when linguistics formalization is being taken to paroxysm⁶.

5. E.g.: L'Homme, Communications, La Linguistique, Langages, Tel Quel, La Nouvelle Critique, Semiotica, Esprit, Les cahiers marxistes-léninistes, Confrontation, La Psychanalyse, Scilicet, L'Inconscient, Change.

6. About this subject, it is curious to notice that the students at Nanterre kept informed about Benveniste's point of view by the philosopher Ricouer and not by the linguist Dubois, what denotes the fear of some linguists such Greimas that all effort of structuralism in order to move psychologism, phenomenology and hermeneutics away from the scientific accuracy into discourse analysis could be suppressed with the return of the repressed.

What is feared is the return of the repressed, and about him, it is always possible to agree with Vernant's opinion to whom there is no reason to worry about man's destiny, since when he is expelled through the door, he returns by the window. As a matter of fact, under attacked by all sides, the major mentors of structuralism will go back: each one denies taking place at structuralism banquet, revealing its works as singular as before they searched by all means to line up their positions into it. Only Lévi-Strauss will still remain convinced of his positions by understanding structuralism strictly as a method disagreeing with those [particularly Althusser] that tried to push it into a speculative field.

In the middle of seventies, the paradigm started to decline with the return of the political engagement, although dispersed by cultural minorities programs in search of visibility, by the necessity of thinking about ethics in order to consolidate democracy in peripheral countries and also by the tragic destiny of its major masters. However, the cohesion of structuralism seems to be historically linked to a tendency for *isolationism*. There is no doubt that not only Nietzsche but also Heidegger was determinant to deconstruct the subject, as much as Freud and Marx, even reviewed, also fed the structuralism machine which incessantly digested the contributions of Prague and Copenhagen Circles, or even, of the Russian formalists. What certainly France did not digest were the critics from American pragmatics and from analytic philosophy, whatever it comes from Carnap, Frege or Wittgenstein, whose repercussion was mostly insignificant and suppressed by Althusser. Therefore, what ensures the apparent unity of structuralism – the way in the adventure of Greek philosophy and the reason – is not a consequence of a “contingent phenomenon”, but it is more like a result of a geographical and historical context. And it is assuming such premises and despite of an autonomous life of concepts – which is always supposed to overcome the spirit of its time –, that the *Isle of France* becomes the world. A world that – no matter the author had not mentioned – becomes postmodern.