

CONTEMPORARY STUDIES
IN PHILOSOPHY
AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES

STRUCTURALISM
The Art
of the
Intelligible

PETER CAWS

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Preface

THE PHILOSOPHICAL INTERESTS that have led, in their roundabout way, to this book have occupied my attention intermittently over some twenty years. Twenty years is a long time in the life of contemporary culture, but a very short time in the life of philosophy. According to the calendar of cultural trends, structuralism has come and gone; poststructuralism, for that matter, seems by now to have come and gone. But according to the calendar of philosophy, as I read it, structuralism has only just arrived. It has been a serious possibility, as a mode (among others) of understanding some aspects of the world, since the early years of this century, but has begun to achieve focus and formulation only in the last few decades.

In the work presented here (some of it previously published in the form of essays and occasional pieces, rewritten for the present purpose, but much of it new or previously communicated only in the form of lectures) I have been concerned to understand this emerging philosophical position and to use its insights in connection with some old problems. I have not approached it from an ideological point of view or tried to defend its hegemonic claims, nor have I been too much concerned to assess its status in relation to other contemporary trends. I have treated it, in other words, for the most part positively, as offering a way of looking at the intelligibility of the human sciences that I at least have found stimulating and useful.

There have been many works on structuralism since my first contribution to the subject in the *Partisan Review* in 1968. This book is still in the spirit of that article: it wishes not only to make the phenomenon intelligible, but also to acknowledge its challenge and its usefulness, neither of which, it seems to me, has lessened in the intervening years, in spite of so much exposition and argument. I am grateful to William Phillips for commissioning that early piece, to Hugh Silverman for his persistence in encouraging me to make it and a dozen or so succeeding pieces the basis for a book (and for his patience in waiting for it), and to the American Council of Learned Societies for a fellowship to work on structuralism in 1972–73. I have contracted the usual debt to colleagues, fellow symposiasts, and lecture audiences, as well as to my students at the City University of New York and at the George Washington University.

In the 1968 *Partisan Review* article was reproduced, with the permission of the *Quinzaine Littéraire*, a now familiar cartoon of the four most notorious

structuralists of the 1960s (Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Lacan, and Foucault) in grass skirts under a palm tree, looking benign and exotic. Of the four Foucault was perhaps the least benign (and the least amused at being called a structuralist), but they were all approachable, and I have been indebted to each of them not only for enlightenment but also for personal courtesy and in some cases for kindness and encouragement. Three of them are now dead, and the fourth has undergone an apotheosis available only to Frenchmen; but what they briefly held in common in those days was less exotic than it appeared and has still, I think, unrealized and central philosophical significance. It was more fundamental and more important than perhaps even they themselves knew, more so certainly than most of their epigones knew, since otherwise they would not have given it up so readily. I would be happy to think (though it may be unrealistic to hope) that this book will help to preserve and consolidate the insights of that time.

In addition to the *Partisan Review* the sources of various parts of what follows include the *Philosophische Rundschau*, *Graviva*, *The New Republic*, *Idealist Studies*, *Philosophers in Their Own Work*, *Diacritics*, *Via*, *Dialogues in Phenomenology*, and the *American Anthropologist*. Most of this material is cut and interwoven in such a way as to make specific identification troublesome, but I acknowledge with thanks the indulgence of my editors in allowing me to use it.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
1. What structuralism is	1
2. Situation and plan of the work	2
3. The concept of structure	4
4. Structure and intelligibility	6
PART IA—ASPECTS OF THE STRUCTURALIST MOVEMENT	
1 Convergence	11
5. Beginnings	11
6. System and structure	12
7. Bourbaki and group structure	14
8. Cassirer and the "symbolic forms"	16
2 Structuralism in France	21
9. Paris fashions	21
10. Mind in its natural state	23
11. Structural transformations	26
12. Stability and subjectivity	28
13. The word of the patient	30
14. The end of man	32

15. Critical work	34
16. Complexity and humanity	36
3 Structuralism in America	41
17. The New World and the postwar period	41
18. Morgan and Peirce	43
19. Structural linguistics	45
20. Structural anthropology	49
21. Structure and violence	51
22. Criticism, new and even newer	53

PART IB—LANGUAGE AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES

4 The Linguistic Base I: The Cours de linguistique générale	59
23. The natural history of language	59
24. Language as system	62
25. <i>Langue</i> and <i>parole</i>	66
26. The doctrine of the sign	70
27. Interpretation and linguistic value	76
28. A Saussurean aberration: the anagrams	80
5 The Linguistic Base II: After Saussure	83
29. The structure of the system	83
30. Oppositions	86
31. Double articulation	89
32. From distinctive features to free discourse	92
33. Distributive and mathematical structure	95
34. Diachrony and the acquisition of language	100

35. Formalism and complexity	105
6 The Social Superstructure	109
36. Semiotics, linguistics, structuralism	109
37. Signs without language	114
38. The mythical structure of the world	116
39. Relations in society	121
40. Individuals and idiosyncrasies	124
41. The human family	127
42. The exchange of gifts	130
43. The prohibition of incest	133
44. Structure and sentiment	137
45. The reality of social structure	141
7 Humanistic Structures and Deconstructions	145
46. The humanities and the human sciences	145
47. History as archaeology	149
48. Varieties of religious belief	155
49. The practice of writing	159
50. A short course in deconstruction	161

PART II—STRUCTURALISM AS PHILOSOPHY

8 Structure as a Necessary and Sufficient Condition of Intelligibility	169
51. Structuralism and philosophy	169
52. Russell and the structure of relations	171
53. Carnap and structural descriptions	175
54. Wittgenstein on form and structure	177

9	Meaning in Life, Language, and Philosophy	183
55.	Meaning and the signiferous	183
56.	The delusion of global meaning	185
57.	The life of meaning	186
58.	Meaning in thought and language	189
59.	The language of philosophy	194
10	Mind, Structure, and System	197
60.	System building	197
61.	Local and global systems	200
62.	Necessitation and accommodation	204
63.	The multiplicity of mind	208
64.	Apposition and mental structure	212
65.	Instruction and optimum complexity	215
11	Human Nature and Society	219
66.	The distribution of structures	219
67.	Operational and representational models	220
68.	Explanatory models and social structures	226
69.	Models and mind-dependence	230
12	Structuralism, Materialism, and Phenomenology	237
70.	Singularity and incompleteness in systematic description	237
71.	The persistence of the subject	239
72.	The stuff of the world	241
73.	The insistence of materialism	242

CONTENTS

xi

74. The world of relations	246
75. Subjectivity and structural materialism	250
Postscript on Poststructuralism	253
76. Macaulay's anchor	253
77. Synchronicity	256
78. The poststructuralist scene	257
List of Works Cited	261
Index	271

Introduction

1. What structuralism is

STRUCTURALISM IS A philosophical view according to which the reality of the objects of the human or social sciences is relational rather than substantial. It generates a critical method that consists of inquiring into and specifying the sets of relations (or structures) that constitute these objects or into which they enter, and of identifying and analyzing groups of such objects whose members are structural transformations of one another. These groups jointly constitute the domains of the respective sciences.

Since the objects in question may be linguistic, psychological, anthropological, mythological, social, economic, political, literary, historical, philosophical, and so on, many "structuralisms" have developed independently in the corresponding domains. Some of them have made claims that go beyond the defining features set forth in my first paragraph. However these need not constrain the rest.

It is useful to distinguish between the objects of the social sciences and those of the natural sciences by noting that the causal determinants of the former always include human intentions, while those of the latter do not. (Objects whose causal antecedents do include intentions continue to be governed by natural laws: social objects are embodied in physical objects. But for natural scientific purposes their intentional origins can be ignored.) Since human intentions always involve an element of significance it is not surprising to find that the structures dealt with by the social sciences are *signiferous*, or "meaning-bearing," and that structuralism therefore generates also a theory of significance and of meaning. It is equally unsurprising that along with the structuralist activity of specifying those structures often goes a hermeneutic activity of interpreting them.

Since structuralism is willing to grant the structures in question the status of intentional objects, it clearly rejects the methodological and antime-taphysical cautions of positivism and behaviorism. But since it does not grant them the status of substantial entries in an ontology independent of human intentions it is just as clearly not an essentialist position.

Structuralism therefore does not require (although it does not exclude) the view that there exists some objective or deep generating structure of which the structures it studies are transformations. Nor does it require

(although it is compatible with) the view that the carrier of those structures, up to and including the structure of subjectivity itself (or the structure that subjectivity is), might be neurophysiological. The relations that carried the structures would on this view not be abstract but concretely embodied in the individual who intended them.

2. Situation and plan of the work

THE FOREGOING SUMMARY definition makes a working point of departure for this book but gives no hint of the controversies that have been stirred up by structuralism in the past decades. "Structuralism, I do not renounce the word, but it has become uncertain." This understatement is due to the late Roland Barthes (1971a:4). The career of the structuralist movement, at any rate at the level of popular enthusiasm in France, where—at that level—it originated, was meteoric: a brilliant streak followed by relative extinction. It managed to pass from novelty to fashion to cliché in a very few years, with hardly any interval of mature reflection, and ceased to be of topical interest some time ago. But on the other hand this very fact may permit its philosophical development in a more measured way, now that the agitation of popularity has subsided. Not every idea that comes to general attention deserves such development; that structuralism does so, quite apart from its notoriety (or its status as *passé*) in the public eye, is one of the conclusions I hope to establish.

This book falls into two parts. The first deals with structuralism historically and critically, as a movement; the second deals with it systematically, as philosophy. The first part is subdivided in its turn, dealing first with the more popular, and then with the more technical aspects of the movement. The same domain is therefore traversed, in effect, three times, but in different orders and by different methods. The relationship between the movement and the philosophy is complex: there is some genetic determination, which however goes in both directions; there is some overlapping; there is some incompatibility. For this reason the distinction between the two parts is not sharp or rigorous and there is a certain amount of redundancy, although I have tried to keep this to a minimum. In general, however, the material of the first part has its sources in the writings of linguists, anthropologists, and others who at one time or another were admitted by themselves, or alleged by their critics, to belong to the structuralist movement, or who can reasonably be said to be its precursors, while the material in the second part derives from my own reflections or from the reflections of other philosophers belonging to that movement neither by admission nor allegation, but indeed for the most part ignoring its existence.

In one sense it is stretching things somewhat to speak of structuralism as a "movement" at all, since it never had the combination of doctrinal and social unity that that term implies. But it was, in its period of popular dominance, a recognizable cluster of writers and ideas with a geographical and temporal focus, namely Paris in the 1960s. This period came to a rather abrupt end in May 1968, but by then the idea of structuralism had become entrenched among the intellectual commonplaces in France. By 1966 it already had this status, as was made clear to me by a conversation I fell into at about that time with an inquisitive French intellectual. Discovering my origins and profession, she wanted to know at once if I was a positivist. No, I said. A Marxist, then? she asked, having exhausted her acquaintance with Anglo-American philosophy in the first question. No, I said again. "Donc vous êtes structuraliste," she said with finality and obvious relief.

In fact I was not then, nor have I since become, a structuralist, if that means anything like an exclusive commitment to a doctrine. As formulated in the second part of this book I believe structuralism to constitute a viable and valuable, even an essential, subdiscipline of philosophy, but I take it to be neither comprehensive nor final. As expounded in the first part, however, I hold no particular brief for it, although I have been greatly stimulated by the work of those I name there as its creators and representatives. It is because in their work I found it philosophically suggestive, but in each particular case incompletely developed and admixed with other prejudices and commitments, and because they and their followers impatiently twitched their mantles and, following the call of fashion, hurried on to fresher woods and newer pastures without stopping long enough to understand or work out what they had stumbled upon, that it has seemed to me worthwhile to attempt the double task of disengaging it from those sources and articulating it in my own terms.

In spite of the deficiencies of structuralist theory, however, my main concern in the first part has been to make it as lucid and coherent as possible, rather than to show it up *as* deficient, a task that some commentators have felt obliged to perform, sometimes rather testily, even while expounding its principles (cf. Clarke 1981, Seung 1982). At the same time I have for the most part limited myself to those aspects of the various disciplines involved in the exposition that are specifically structuralist or particularly relevant to structuralism, so that in discussing linguistics, for example, the attention paid to Saussure (to take the most obvious case) is out of all proportion to his importance in the history of linguistics as a discipline. On the other hand his importance, like that of some of the other figures dealt with here, has been underestimated, thanks largely to the habitual xenophobia of Anglo-American scholarship, so that a redressing of the balance is not out of order.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge, and try to dissociate myself

from, the xenophilia, or more specifically the Francophilia, of some epigones, that leads to a countervailing tendency to *overestimate* the importance of certain writers. This is often accompanied by excitement about the new or the exotic, and the writing it produces tends to have the breathless urgency of sports commentary: revolutions occur, paradigms succeed one another, movements rise and fall, at a dizzying rate. I discuss this rather French malady in chapter 2, but wish to make a point here about the historical setting of structuralism. It just is not the case, it seems to me, that we are at the mercy of wild paradigm shifts or even that we need to think very much about what paradigm we are working under (though my obvious discontent with this way of talking is not meant to belittle Kuhn's original study, which in its own domain was seminal). The last serious revolutionary in philosophy I take to have been Kant, the implications of whose work we are far from having exhausted. He concluded that we were subjects in a closed world of appearances, and nobody has yet found a way out—not Hegel, not Nietzsche, not Dewey, not Heidegger, not Wittgenstein, not even Husserl. They have shown us different ways of living in that world; structuralism, I think, helps to make it more intelligible.

Philosophical history is long and slow, and remembering this helps keep momentary events in perspective. In reading accounts of the current intellectual scene I am sometimes reminded of Macaulay's remark about the American Constitution, that it was "all sail and no anchor"; only such a vessel is likely to worry about what one of the more excitable commentators has called "the new maelstrom" of poststructuralist modernity (Fekete 1984). These upheavals belong, it seems to me, to microclimates of intellectual opinion. What corresponds to the anchor is the accumulation of empirical work that has continued since Kant: we really do know more than was known two centuries ago about logic and theory construction and languages and social customs and brains, and this knowledge helps in our understanding of the ways we structure experience and the artifacts and institutions we create from it and for it, which form the problematic domain of structuralism.

3. The concept of structure

A WORD ABOUT the name "structuralism" itself. The trouble with the formation of such terms from ordinary roots is that their meanings seem straightforward but in practice become confused for that very reason. For the meanings of the ordinary roots themselves, at any rate of those that designate relatively abstract categories, are various and multiple, and require a good deal of supplementary clarification before two people can be sure they are

interpreting one in similar senses. "Structure" is from the past participle form (*structum*) of the Latin verb *struere*, "to put together, put in order," which has the special senses of piling up, building, and arranging; it is from an Indo-European root meaning to lay out, extend, and so on, from which we also get "strew" and other cognates. The ordinary-language meaning of the word is now either the way in which some more or less organized and stable entity is built or put together, or alternatively the entity itself seen as organized in this way. But the entity can be anything from a molecule to a skyscraper, from a word to a novel, a game, a tradition, a constitution; by applying to almost everything, "structural" runs the risk that it will not be enlightening when used of any particular thing. Adding the suffix "-ism," a standard Greek device for turning events or processes into objects (*baptizein* into *baptismos*, "baptize" into "baptism," is the paradigmatic example), lends an air of definiteness without necessarily bringing any clarification.

When, as in the present case, many people seize enthusiastically upon such an expression at the same time, semantic chaos ensues. Prudence suggests avoiding the term altogether. But this is unrealistic: structuralism as a movement is too recent, and its methodological legacy, at least in certain domains, too pervasive; since I shall be discussing the movement and the methodology, as well as their philosophical setting and implications, it has seemed wise to embrace the name of "structuralism," stipulate a definition of "structure," and proceed (adopting one of Descartes's provisional maxims) to "follow no less constantly the most doubtful opinions, once determined upon them, than if they had been most assured" (Descartes 1953:142). The enterprise as a whole thus remains open to criticism but aims at least for sufficient clarity and distinctness to make this possible without further redefinition.

In fact this strategy is not as desperate as it sounds; like materialism and existentialism, structuralism does lend itself to an interpretation based on a plausible definition of its ordinary root. (The definition I adopt—of structure as a set of relations—is given implicitly in my opening paragraph and will be elaborated upon as the book proceeds.) This association with existentialism and materialism goes further, for human existence, matter, and structure have a complementary relation to one another in a sense to be explained at length in chapter 12. Structuralism therefore has, at least potentially, an important role to play in contemporary Western philosophy. The limitation on the sense of the term that is imposed by the cluster of recent ideas to be studied in this book has been admirably expressed by Leach:

Empirical structures can be recognized in every aspect of the universe. . . . but in linguistics and social anthropology we are only