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Marshall Sahlins: to Paris and Back

Entering into the field of American anthropology as a young man in the 1950s, Marshall Sahlins entered a debate in which there were ranged against each other two venerable, rival traditions of thinking about culture, each of which offered an account of human history and a theory of human nature. The first tradition, universalist and evolutionist, was based on the proposition that human beings are all the same biologically, with identical needs. The defining quality of human beings is that they developed culture, which evolved, with modern humans, as a technique for managing nature and satisfying these shared physical requirements. Over the millennia cultural adaptations have become increasingly efficient, improvements spreading from more advanced to less favoured populations. The history of the species is a record of the accumulation of practical knowledge, the evolution of a progressively more efficient bag of cultural tricks.

In the other tradition, culture was conceived of as a local and specific system of ideas, expressed in symbols, realised most fully in religious dogmas, myths and rituals. Its critical function is to imbue life with meaning. Each culture is unique, and cultures are the source of particular ethnic identities. Every people has its own traditions and values, and makes its own history. The argument between these two rival conceptions of culture runs right through the history of American anthropology in the twentieth century, pitting cultural relativists against cultural evolutionists. The protagonists in the early twentieth century were Franz Boas and his students, on the one hand, and the heirs of Lewis Henry Morgan on the other. By mid-century a neo-Boasian school, by then the reigning orthodoxy, was challenged by a revival of neo-evolutionist thinking in anthropology.

The evolutionist revival that took shape in the 1950s was led by Leslie White at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and Julian Steward, who taught at Columbia University from 1946 to 1952. A set of young scholars formed around the two men, including a number of ex-servicemen, radical in politics. Marshall Sahlins was a junior member of this group, which included Elman Service, Eric Wolf, Sidney Mintz, Roy Rappaport and Marvin Harris. Like several of the others, Sahlins moved between Columbia, where he took his doctorate, and Michigan, where he had taken his first degree, and where he served on the faculty from 1957 to 1973.

Steward and White differed on many fundamental issues, but agreed on the essential point. Boas, with his sceptical attitude to generalisation, his

insistence on the particularity of cultural identities, had led us astray. Anthropologists should once more work to develop a generalising, evolutionist science of culture. The young associates of Steward and White were more or less united in their theoretical views, and entirely solidary in the face of the common enemy, the anthropological establishment, the culturalists. Marvin Harris's extremely successful *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, 1968, was a polemical history of anthropology, which he represented as an epic struggle between a long line of entirely admirable evolutionists and their anti-scientific, relativist opponents.[1] The confrontation had a special edge, for the culturalists themselves began a phase of intellectual renewal in the 1960s under the intellectual leadership of Clifford Geertz.

In the 1950s and 1960s, this new school of evolutionists reclaimed the abandoned territory of Victorian social theory, promising a more sophisticated model of social and cultural progress, and a fresh understanding of pre-capitalist economics. It was a coherent movement, its young cadres confident that they would revolutionise the field. Marshall Sahlins was one of its rising stars. All the more surprising, therefore, when in the late 1960s Sahlins abruptly abandoned the evolutionist position to which he had adhered for the better part of two decades. The process of conversion remains mysterious, but his road to Damascus passed by way of Paris, where he spent two years, from 1967 to 1969. This was a time of great perturbations on the Left Bank, a heady moment in which to work out new ideas. Structuralism and Marxism were locked in an epic struggle for the soul of French intellectuals; and, it turned out, for the soul of Marshall Sahlins.

I

His conversion from a Marxist-friendly evolutionism to a variety of cultural determinism was complete by the time Sahlins published *Culture and Practical Reason*, in 1976. While this book was something of a polemic in favour of ideological determinism, there were continuities with his earlier ideas, some unremarked by the author (who did not, in any case, address his past errors). But, more particularly, Sahlins took for granted a continuity with the polemics of his home milieu. Sahlins represented the debates between the French structuralists and Marxists as a reprise of the American arguments between culturalists and evolutionists, though it was

[1]Other members of the group produced popular textbooks that spread the new ideas, notably: Marshall Sahlins and Elman R. Service, *Evolution and Culture*, 1960; Elman R. Service, *Primitive Social Organization*, 1962; Eric Wolf, *Anthropology*, 1964; Leslie White, *The Social Organization of Ethnological Theory*, 1966 (a essay which sets out some of the ideas developed in Harris's history of anthropology); E.R.Service, *The Hunters*, 1966; M.D.Sahlins, *Tribesmen*, 1968; Eric Wolf, *Peasants*, 1966.

apparent that he found the Parisian arguments more exciting, more elevated, and more relevant politically. For Sahlins, Paris was the front line in the confrontation between the two classical conceptions of culture in anthropology, or rather, more precisely, in American anthropology. He read the confrontation between Marxism and structuralism as the latest and decisive engagement in a long-running argument between materialism and idealism, universalism and cultural relativism.

The materialists, Sahlins explained, treated culture as a set of tools, a technology for the rational exploitation of nature. It followed that the history of humanity could be divided into a succession of stages that were marked by changes in the mode of production. This was the conception of Tylor and also, Sahlins suggested, of the early Marx. (This was Althusser's Paris too, in which Marx appeared in early and late versions, positivist and humanist, materialist and idealist, among whom Marxists had to choose.) Sahlins linked the later Marx to the neo-evolutionist position of his mentor Leslie White, who strove, though unsuccessfully (Sahlins now suggested), to combine a view of culture as a symbolic system with a theory of technological determinism. This explicit engagement with Marx's ideas was a new phenomenon in American anthropology, even among the radical young men in the Leslie White circle, who had felt obliged to soft-peddle their interest in Marx in the McCarthyite period. Now, as the Vietnam War polarised opinion and put in question the entrenched anti-Communism of American intellectuals, Marxism became a respectable, even fashionable, position in American academic life. And, of course, as Sahlins found in Paris, in those days all sorts of arguments led back to Marx.

While the American evolutionist tradition was being renewed, and developing a sympathetic interest in Marxism, the new idealists in American anthropology had also sharpened their theoretical ideas, largely under the influence of Talcott Parsons. They now treated culture as a symbolic system, a bundle of ideas that shaped action and informed events. Sahlins conceived French structuralism as essentially a more sophisticated version of this approach. In his account, the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss appeared to be remarkably similar to the cultural theory of Clifford Geertz. This point of view yielded a decidedly ethnocentric account of French structuralism. The core proposition of the structuralists, as Sahlins formulated it, could have been the motto of the new American school of cultural analysis. 'For structuralism, meaning is the essential property of the cultural object, as symboling is the specific faculty of man'[2]. Yet Geertz himself had denounced Lévi-Strauss's more fundamental premise, that all cultural meaning was generated by a single ordering matrix, that the logic of symbolism was a function of a universal *esprit humain*[3]. And it was evident

[2] *Culture and Practical Reason*, p.22.
[3] Clifford Geertz, 'The cerebral savage: on the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss', 1967.

enough that structuralism was a profoundly European enterprise, one that was, moreover, linked inextricably with the career of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss had been influenced by Boasian anthropology during his wartime exile in the USA, but his was nevertheless a very different project. Sahlins underplayed Lévi-Strauss's universalism, his conviction that the human mind imposes invariant constraints on all cultural phenomena. If Lévi-Strauss was in some sense a relativist, he was not in fact an intellectual kinsman of Geertz, as Geertz himself clearly appreciated.

In the 1960s, Lévi-Strauss published his major studies of how people think, culturally or, as he said, totemically or mythologically: *Le totémisme aujourd'hui* in 1962, *La pensée sauvage* in 1964, and then the first volume of his *Mythologiques* sequence, *Le cru et le cuit*, in 1966. This extraordinary series of books had a profound influence on contemporaries, particularly in Paris. Roland Barthes popularised a version of structuralism in his essays on literature and popular culture. Jacques Lacan, 'the French Freud', published his *Ecrits* in 1966, which introduced structuralist thinking into psychoanalysis. J-P Vernant brought structuralist methods to bear upon classical scholarship, and a new generation of *Annalistes* began to publish structuralist accounts of historical *mentalités*.[4]

Structuralism did not, however, go unchallenged. Indeed, it soon had virulent opponents, particularly on the left. This was hardly surprising, for on the face of it structuralism was incompatible with Marxism, and Marxism was a major political force among Left-Bank intellectuals; though, of course, there was fierce dispute about what precisely it was that Marx had said, let alone what he would have said had he enjoyed the good fortune to live in Paris after the Liberation. 'In France,' as Marc Augé remarked at the time, 'the anthropological debate turns on an opposition between those who, in one sense or another, are avowed Marxists, and those who repudiate this line of descent.'[5] Lévi-Strauss sometimes remarked defensively that he was engaged in a project neglected by Marx, the construction of a science of the superstructure. The occasional concessions that he made in the 1960s to the Marxist agenda were later to be something of an embarrassment to him[6], but it was always apparent that he was not much concerned with economic final causes, even in that remote last instance to which modern Marxists sometimes wistfully appealed. Nor did the structuralists appear to have much interest in the class struggle, in theory or in practice. Their preferred subject-matter was the realm of ideas, and if they called this 'ideology' or 'superstructure', this was as a concession to the Marxist idiom of the day,

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[4]Lévi-Strauss was notoriously dismissive of these neo-structuralists. See chapter 6, 'Structuralism in Paris', in Didier Eribon, *Conversations with Lévi-Strauss*, 1991.

[5]Marc Augé, *The Anthropological Circle: Symbol, Function, History*, 1982 p.3. (First published in French, 1979.)

[6]See Didier Eribon, *Conversations with Lévi-Strauss*,1991, pp.107-8.

Lévi-Strauss, and, to take another example, Louis Dumont, did not describe ideologies as the self-consciousness of a particular social class, or as an instrument of power.

Radical critics also claimed that structuralism could not account for processes of change, and that it was therefore implicitly conservative, providing support for a bourgeoisie that yearned for tradition and stability. Lévi-Strauss had suggested even more provocatively that the very idea of progress was a culturally specific Western notion, one that could not be generalised[7]. Progress 'never represents anything more than the maximum progress in a given direction, pre-determined by the interest of the observer'.[8] This relativism was not welcomed by thinkers on the Left. Sartre, who launched a wounding attack on his former friend, insisted that intellectuals must remain faithful to the Enlightenment dogma 'that there is one history of man with one truth and one intelligibility'[9]. In post-war Paris, anti-'progressive' heresies could provoke a capital indictment of political unreliability, and Lévi-Strauss had been a target at least since 1955, when the Marxist writer, Maxime Rodinson, charged that his ideas would 'bring desperation to Billancourt' (then a solidly Communist working-class in the Paris region)[10].

Lévi-Strauss also distanced himself from the anti-colonial movement, with which many of the younger French anthropologists were engaged. The Algerian conflict came to a crisis in the early 1960s, and polarised opinion in France, just as the Vietnam War was soon to divide America. A distinguished anthropologist, Jacques Soustelle, whom Lévi-Strauss respected, became the leader of the settlers as they made their final, doomed push for *l'Algerie Française*. Most anthropologists, however, took the anti-colonialist side, and Lévi-Strauss's rival in French anthropology, Georges Balandier, insisted that so-called tribal societies should not be treated as splendid isolates, but must be studied in the context of colonial domination.

Students of Balandier, in particular Emmanuel Terray and Claude Meillassoux, attempted to construct a Marxist account of what they termed pre-capitalist societies; an enterprise related, if at some distance, to the trans-Atlantic project of Polanyi and the American substantivists. Maurice Godelier ventured across the Atlantic in search of new ideas, and his essays of the period[11] were influenced by discussions with the American

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[7]See especially his *Race and History*,1952.

[8]Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History*,1952, p.40.

[9]Quoted in David Pace, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Bearer of Ashes*, 1983, p.111. This book gives a summary of the debate between Lévi-Strauss and his Marxist critics.For a more extended discussion, see Gerald Gaillard, *Images d'une generation*, 1988, volume 1, especially chapter six.

[10]Op.cit., p.119.

[11]Collected as *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics* (1972, French edition, 1966), and

substantivists, including Sahlins. Some young Marxist anthropologists were, however, fascinated by the elegance and power of Lévi-Strauss's work, and Maurice Godelier in particular aspired to construct a new synthesis between Marxism and structuralism.[12] Sahlins too was in search of such a synthesis, in his case one that would deliver both a structuralist history and a cultural understanding of economics.

II

'The question that first inspired this book,' Sahlins wrote in his introduction to *Culture and Practical Reason*, 'was whether the materialist conception of history and culture, as Marx formulated it theoretically, could be translated without friction to the comprehension of tribal societies.'[13] The short answer was that it could not. The early Marx treated culture 'as an intervention in physical nature'[14]. The later Marx dealt with meaning, but 'only in its capacity as the expression of human relations'[15]; in other words, as ideology. Marx was, of course, ignorant of the conception of culture that would be developed in twentieth century anthropology, as a symbolic system that imposed itself on nature and on historical events; but modern Marxists had been unable to come to terms with this new idea. To sort out Marxist difficulties with that conception of culture 'would be of the highest service to anthropology and Marxist theory alike'[16].

So far as Sahlins was concerned, anthropology had already established a fundamental critique of Marxism. He and others had demonstrated that the classic opposition between a material base that underpinned the life of a society, and a superstructure of dependent institutions and mystifying ideologies that was erected upon it, did not apply in tribal societies. As Godelier has noted, in the late fifties he (and other anthropologists) 'began to see the distinction between infrastructure and superstructure no longer as a distinction between institutions, but as one between functions which could be located in very different areas of social practice'.[17] This had been a central theme in Sahlins's essays in *Stone Age Economics*. 'In the tribal cultures,' he now wrote, summing up the argument, 'economy, polity, ritual and ideology do not appear as distinct "systems", nor can relationships be

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Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology (1977, French edition, 1972).

[12]On Lévi-Strauss and on Godelier, and in general for a detailed history of this phase of French anthropology, see Gerald Gaillard, *Images d'une generation*, 1988. A valuable insider's account of the state of play in these circles in Paris at the time is Marc Augé's *The Anthropological Circle: Symbol, Function, History* 1982 (first published in French in 1979).

[13]Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason*, 1976, p.1.

[14]Op.cit., p.127.

[15]Op.cit., p.139.

[16]Op.cit., p.2.

[17]Godelier, 'Intellectual roots, 1994, p.110.

easily assigned to one or another of these functions.'[18] Kinship bonds may be mobilised to organise, kinship values to motivate, action that could be described as economic, political or religious.

Sahlins credited the French structuralists with a yet more radical criticism of Marxist theory. The distinction between base and superstructure was itself a cultural illusion. Vulgar Marxists deluded themselves that only material forces were real. On the contrary, everything in society, even production, is best understood as a system of ideas. 'The so-called infrastructure appears as the manifestation of a total system of meanings in action upon the world.'[19] Lévi-Strauss had certainly never formulated such an argument, generally writing in more guarded terms about the limited independence of the ideological superstructure. Yet Sahlins insisted it was this thesis that had inevitably brought structuralism into conflict with Marxism. 'The relation between productive action in the world and the symbolic organization of experience - this is the issue between Marxism and French structuralism.'[20] Although structuralism had been brought to bear mainly on primitive or tribal society, the proposition that people are what they think could - indeed, should - be equally applicable to ourselves. Sahlins rejected the possibility that it might be true only of primitive societies, while Marxism proper applied to capitalist society (just as some had argued that substantivist economists applied to tribes, formal economics to market economies). There was room only for one theory. Culture, the symbolic order, ruled everywhere.

To be sure, there were differences between tribal and modern societies, but these did not reside in their technologies or social organisation. The essential difference was that they understood themselves in different terms. The great divide between primitive and civilised societies was not therefore due to different modes of production or types of social structure. It was caused by different cultural orientations. The fundamental contrast between the two types of society resided in their symbolic systems. The 'differences in institutional design... correspond to different modes of symbolic production, contrasting both in objective medium and in dynamic capacity'.[21] But these symbolic differences yielded two very different types of society. 'In bourgeois society, material production is the dominant locus of symbolic production; in primitive society it is the set of social (kinship) relations.'[22] There remained two great phases in human history, two stages of social evolution.

Recast in this idealist form, Sahlins therefore retrieved the classical

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[18] *Culture and Practical Reason*, p.6.
[19] Op.cit., p.39.
[20] Op.cit., p.3.
[21] Op.cit., p.212.
[22] Op.cit., p.212.

dichotomy between two stages in social evolution, represented by primitive and civilised societies, or rather between what he termed tribal and Western or (using the Marxist idiom) 'bourgeois' society. And because he retained this bipolar model he was able, like many of his predecessors, to oppose an idealised savage world to the troubled civilisation of his own society. The tribal world was represented indifferently by Kung Bushmen, or Fijian villagers, or the Zulu in the time of Shaka, while modern, or western, or bourgeois society turned out to be the contemporary USA. Sahlins was not much interested in the differences between, for example, the USA and France, and there was no place in this Manichean world for the USSR and China, or Japan and the emerging Asian tigers. And the essence of American civilisation was the culture of consumption, which had only to be identified and unmasked to be ridiculed and rejected.

III

Culture and Practical Reason reads at times like a translation from the French, replete with Gallicisms, especially the favoured structuralist tropes ('everything happens as if...'), and peppered with dollops of authentic Left-Bank vernacular. Yet though insistently couched in the idiom of the Left Bank, his argument continued the long debate between the two schools of American cultural anthropology. On the one side was the evolutionist approach that he had espoused in an earlier incarnation, on the other the culturalism that was coming into its own once more, in the sophisticated hands of Clifford Geertz and David Schneider. Posing the central issue as one between material and cultural determinism, *Culture and Practical Reason* inevitably recalls Marvin Harris's *Rise of Anthropological Theory*, which had appeared in 1968, but with the not insignificant reservation that Sahlins turned Harris's argument on its head, taking the side of the culturalists against the evolutionists.

Sahlins was also preoccupied, as he had been from the first, with a traditional anthropological issue, the transformation of tribal societies into chiefdoms and states. The early Sahlins had revived the classic idea that chiefdoms had everywhere, inevitably issued from the loose order of the tribe. Chiefdoms had then eventually developed uniformly into states. The driving force throughout was technological change. In his new, idealist, incarnation, Sahlins remained convinced that there had been a world-wide movement from tribes to chiefdoms and states. However, he now needed to find a fresh explanation for this process, one that would locate the crucial changes in the realm of ideas.

This was clearly no small task, certainly for a structuralist. Edmund Leach had ruminated that a model of categories of thought could not, by its very nature, incorporate change, since it necessarily locked concepts to one another in a stable system. He suggested that for similar reasons tribal

societies, with their static ideologies, could not contemplate change.[23] Lévi-Strauss floated the notion that some societies were, in a sense, static, and so perhaps especially fitted for a structural analysis. There was a difference in kind between 'cold' tribal societies, whose history was repetitive, and the 'hot' societies, which were in a state of constant flux[24]. Lévi-Strauss did not deny that time and tide happen to all men. What mattered was the way in which people understood history, and managed it. So-called primitive societies tried to annul history, to recast events as mere repetitions of an established, cyclical pattern.[25]

Sahlins advanced essentially the same argument. The difference between tribal and modern society resided in their symbolic codes. Moreover, each kind of society, each symbolic system, generated its own characteristic history. It was the historiography of tribal societies that was 'cold', constructing repetitive cycles from the accidents of events, and so shoring up its institutions against change. In contrast, the West welcomes change and conceives of history on the model of rapidly changing fashions, operating 'an open, expanding code, responsive by continuous permutation to events it has itself staged'[26]. Change and stability are features of codes, not of events.

These ideas, sketched out in *Culture and Practical Reason*, provided the starting-point for his next project. The objective was to provide a cultural account of the movement from chieftaincy to state, and in the process to show how structuralists could explain history. The demonstration Sahlins proposed was to be a structural history of Polynesian chiefdoms and states. It was a natural choice, for Sahlins was an authority on Polynesian ethnography, and he had already concluded that states had emerged from chieftaincies in Polynesia at the moment of contact with Europeans. Yet he might once again have been inspired by a hint from Lévi-Strauss, for the Master had noted that Polynesian mythology had itself undergone a change, admitting history. 'Some Polynesian mythologies', Lévi-Strauss had observed, 'are at the critical point where diachrony irrevocably prevails over synchrony, making it impossible to interpret the human order as a fixed projection of the natural order by which it is engendered.' In Polynesia, he concluded, one might be able to see how such systems 'succeed in eliminating history or, when that is impossible, integrating it'.[27] The secret of Polynesian history was to be found in their mythology.

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[23] E.R.Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, 1954.

[24] See Lévi-Strauss,*Race and History*, 1952 and *The Scope of Anthropology*, 1968, pp.49-50 (a translation of his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, delivered in 1960).

[25] See, e.g., chapters eight and nine of *La Pensée Sauvage*,1962.

[26] *Culture and Practical Reason*, p.211.

[27] Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 1966, p.253. (First published as *La pensée sauvage*, 1962.)

IV

In the 1960s the study of myth had been revolutionised by Lévi-Strauss. He devoted himself for two decades, from 1950 to 1970, to the study of American Indian myths[28], and he set the study of myth at the heart of the structuralist enterprise in anthropology. The characters of American mythology were often animals or birds, and their human protagonists were representative hunters, lovers, travellers. As Lévi-Strauss interpreted them, these myths were reflections on eternal, unchanging themes: the paradoxical demands of social institutions, or the relationships between human beings and other creatures, and the boundaries between nature and culture. Myths were vehicles for cosmological discourse, a series of essays on nature and human destiny. The myths of a society formed a corpus. They reflected on one another, each myth taking up themes treated by other myths, transforming the terms of their arguments, and producing different resolutions of the existential problems with which they wrestled.

For Lévi-Strauss, then, myths were a mode of philosophising. However, others had long argued that they might also represent a genre of historiography. In the Americas, as in other parts of the world, there were many stories concerning the past of contemporary communities, or about the origin of customs. Boas had tried to reconstruct the microhistories of the peoples of the Northwest coast, drawing, in part, on native traditions. This type of research had since become unfashionable. For a generation, history was neglected by functionalists and structuralists. Their concern was with the present, or rather that vague and timeless age they referred to as the ethnographic present. In the 1960s, however, there had been a revival in the study of the past of peoples who had been thought to lack history since they had no written documents. Scholars began to link oral traditions with the evidence from archaeology and philology, and with the reports of early European observers. There was, in short, a return to something like the historical project of Boas. The times demanded it, after all. European colonies in Africa and Oceania were gaining political independence, and they required the dignity of a history. Sahlins confesses that he himself had been a slave to the illusion of the ethnographic present, and had changed his focus only in the 1970s, 'in a burst of enthusiasm over the discovery that peoples of the Pacific I had studied indeed had a history'[29].

Nevertheless, there were still great uncertainties about the extent to which the often fabulous stories transmitted in oral traditions referred to historical events. Lévi-Strauss was inclined to take the view that all history was

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[28]The main results of this study were the four volumes of *Mythologiques*: 1964, *Le Cru et le Cuit* (*The Raw and the Cooked*, 1969); 1966, *Du Miel aux cendres* (*From Honey to Ashes*, 1973); 1968, *L'Origine des manières de table* (*The Origin of Table Manners*, 1978); and 1972, *L'Homme nu* (*The Naked Man*,1981).

[29]Sahlins, *Islands of History*,1985, p.xviii.

myth, and he suggested that the French Revolution functioned as a myth for Sartre, and for the French Left in general. Sahlins, however, suggested that in Polynesia myths shaded into history, as stories about the remote age of creation and heroic ancestors led on to accounts of bygone chiefs. 'A more mythic formulation of earlier epochs gives way to epic tales, even as continuity is maintained from the supernatural heroes of the remote past to recent chiefs through a series of local permutations.'[30]

But Sahlins was not content to show that myths might yield up historical information. He had a theoretical interest, which was to repair a notorious fault of structuralism: its inability to account for change. The solution was to demonstrate that myths -the stuff of the classic structuralist studies - were actually the engine of change. First, people interpreted new events to fit the ideas they had about the patterns of the past. Myths of origin reappeared lightly transformed as historical epics, and then as the news of the day. 'The final form of cosmic myth is current event.'[31] This suggested another proposition, more radical in its implications. Myths, in a sense, foretold what was to come; or as Sahlins put it, Polynesians 'think of the future as behind them'[32]. Consequently, myths could also offer guidelines for action. They might serve as prototypes on which people could model their own actions. Ordinary folk might behave as though they were themselves mythological characters.

In other words, his thesis was that myths explained change, and also helped to effect it, offering at once an account of the past and a guide to action in the future. 'Mythical incidents constitute archetypal situations. The experiences of celebrated mythical protagonists are re-experienced by the living in analogous circumstances. More the living <u>become</u> mythical heroes.'[33] Sahlins called such behaviour mytho-praxis, and suggested that it came particularly easily to people in societies such as those of Polynesia where the characters of mythology were linked genealogically to the living. Chiefs were descended from the gods, and related to their own people; and they identified themselves with their mythological ancestors and emulated their deeds. In Hawaii, 'the royal heroes prove to be the true successors of the gods by duplicating the divine exploits on the plane of earth... Politics appears as the continuation of cosmogonic war by other means.'[34]

In sum, myths were histories; they consecrated current arrangements; and they provided scripts that could be followed in the future. The stubborn opposition between structure and event, on which Lévi-Strauss insisted, was revealed to be an illusion, Sahlins claimed. Nevertheless, a residue had

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[30]Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*, 1981, p.15.
[31]Sahlins, *Islands of History*, 1985, p.58.
[32]Op.cit. p.55. The comment refers here specifically to the Maori.
[33]Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*,p.14.
[34]Sahlins, *How 'Natives' Think: About Captain Cook, For Example*, 1995, p. 25.

to be admitted. Mythopraxis, or what Sahlins also called stereotypical reproduction (borrowing a phrase from Godelier), never yielded a perfect replication of the prototypical, mythical event. A theory of structure had somehow to leave room for manoeuvre, for agency, for the tactical moves of individuals, and for the intrusion of outsiders, or the unpredictable eruption of natural forces. Structures must be shown to constrain individual choices, and yet also, somehow, to make sense even of deviations and innovations. The problem was the same whether structures were conceived of as systems of ideas, or as systems of power relationships.

This mix of structure and event he termed 'the structure of the conjuncture', a rather confusing mélange of terms from Lévi-Strauss, Braudel and, indeed, Marx.[35] As he applied this idea in his work, the central proposition was that although myths were essentially conservative, if they were given a push by events they could trigger a series of transformations. Myths provided a model for understanding events, and they guided people when they acted. But some events had the power to subvert the framework of meaning that people tried to impose on them, enforcing changes in the symbolic order itself. Mytho-praxis could not absorb every shock presented to it, freezing history. 'The great challenge to an historical anthropology', he concluded, 'is not merely to know how events are ordered by culture, but how, in that process, the culture is reordered. How does the reproduction of a structure become its transformation?'[36]

V

Sahlins worked up several case-studies of mythopraxis in Polynesia in the early period of European contact[37], envisaging an eventual three-volume work, to be entitled *The Dying God, Or the History of the Sandwich Islands as Culture*[38]. The particular case-study to which he devoted closest attention - and which provoked the greatest interest - concerned the visit of Captain Cook to Hawaii in 1778-1779, his death there, and the revolutionary changes that followed.

His analysis is the subject of great controversy at present, but in my view, his excursion into Pacific history cannot establish the power of structural

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[35] Sahlins offers a variety of definitions of this notion of a structure of the conjuncture. One is as 'a situational set of relations, crystallized from the operative cultural categories and actors' interests. Like Giddens's (1976) notion of social action, it is subject to the double structural determination of intentions grounded in a cultural scheme and the unintended consequences arising from recuperation in other projects and schemes.' *Islands of History*, p.125, note.

[36] *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*, p.8.

[37] The most important of these were collected in two books, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*, 1981, and *Islands of History*, 1985.

[38] *Historical Metaphors and Historical Realities*, pp.vii-viii.

historiography, or the universal force of mythopraxis. The sources are probably
inadequate for the task. But there is another, more fundamental, difficulty: the theory is itself not clearly formulated. Sahlins's statements of his ideas slip between strong and weak versions: from what can read like an extreme form of cultural determinism to something less adventurous, even banal. Replying to Jonathan Friedman's charge that he is a cultural determinist, Sahlins asks, 'does Friedman really think I am Leslie White reincarnated as Lévi-Strauss?'[39] I cannot answer for Friedman, but I must admit that reading Sahlins sometimes drives me to precisely this conclusion.

The early Sahlins aspired to put American anthropology to rights by introducing a new theoretical inspiration, drawn from Marx. The mature Sahlins tried to repair the deficiencies of the Marxist model by drawing on Lévi-Strauss. To put it another way, for the first half of his career Sahlins accepted the arguments against cultural determinism. In Paris, he also accepted, and developed, the arguments against dialectical materialism. Perhaps he was right on both these counts, but my point is that he is best understood as a protagonist in specific debates within American anthropology, or rather in the central, great debate that dominated American anthropology, divided as it always has been between the evolutionary materialists and the cultural relativists. Both Marx and Lévi-Strauss were transformed by him into protagonists in this specialised American debate. They certainly enlivened it, even if they both lost something in translation.

It is a curious irony that Sahlins's account of Hawaiian mythopraxis is now fashionable among the anthropologists of Paris, who are perhaps nostalgic for the great days when French structuralism and Marxism were at the centre of international anthropological debates. They are now evidently encouraged by the revival of these theories in the hands of a leading American anthropologist.

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[39] Sahlins, 'Deserted islands of history: A reply to Jonathan Friedman', 1989, p.41.

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