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Introduction

“Lévy-Bruhl on gambling”

Frédéric KECK, CNRS

After his most successful book, *La mentalité primitive* (1922), Lévy-Bruhl published in *The Criterion*, a journal then directed by poet T. S. Elliott, an article entitled “Primitive mentality and gambling” whose French version, “Mentalité primitive et jeu de hasard,” was published two years later in the *Revue de Paris*. In this introduction to the forum around the reedition of this text, I contextualize this and other works by this author not only within the intellectual currents of the day, but also within events in broader French society in the period leading up to WWI, and particularly the “Dreyfus Affair,” which directly affected him. My interpretation is the following: while Dreyfus was accused by the army with arguments whose rationality was borrowed from magic and witchcraft, and the dreyfusards had to use the rationality of the Enlightenment to defend him, Lévy-Bruhl and his fellow socialists had to « think like primitives » when they engaged in the war as in a gamble.

Keywords: Lévy-Bruhl, gambling, French sociology, Dreyfus Affair

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939) has remained (in)famous for a series of six books on “primitive mentality,” published between 1910 and 1938, and a series of “notebooks” published posthumously in 1949, in which he renounced his most controversial terms such as “prelogical” (Lévy-Bruhl 1978). His work has long been blamed for a view of some human societies as “inferior,” “reluctant to logic,” “impervious to experience,” although, as a colleague of Emile Durkheim at the Sorbonne, a friend of Jean Jaurès at the École Normale and a cousin of Alfred Dreyfus whom he constantly defended during the whole “Dreyfus Affair,” he was a convinced socialist and a strong critic of evolutionism and racism. In the last twenty years, his reflection on “how natives think” has been reappraised by cognitive anthropologists as well as by partisans of the “ontological turn” (Jorion 1989; Goldman 1990; Viveiros de Castro 2014)—two very opposite sides of the anthropological debate. Indeed, Lévy-Bruhl’s positions, between a strong claim of relativism and a desire to widen the universal specter of “White adult civilized individuals” (Lévy-Bruhl 1910: 11) as representative of humankind, have remained an enigma for those who have commented on his work.

We have decided to open a forum in *HAU* about one of the most forgotten aspects of the work of Lévy-Bruhl, which may be one of the most pertinent for the contemporary world: his reflection on gambling. In what follows, I contextualize this and other works by this author not only within the intellectual currents of the day, but also within events in broader French society in the period leading up to the First World War, and particularly the “Dreyfus Affair,” which directly affected him. After his most successful book, *La mentalité primitive* (1922), Lévy-Bruhl published in *The Criterion*, a journal then edited by poet T. S. Elliott, an article entitled “Primitive mentality and gambling” whose French version, “Mentalité primitive et jeu de hasard,” was published two years later in the *Revue de Paris*. The latter was a journal that reached a wide audience, including literary writers and diplomats. Lévy-Bruhl is then at the summit of his career: he is a professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne, where he supports the rise of the students of Emile Durkheim after his death in 1917, he presides over the Society of the Friends of Jaurès after his assassination in 1914, and he is about to create the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Paris with Marcel Mauss and



Paul Rivet, an institution that will sponsor the great expeditions of Marcel Griaule in Africa and Claude Lévi-Strauss in Amazonia. His writing, both precise and elegant, is appreciated by a whole range of readers, from philosophers to sociologists, from colonial officers to literary writers. Why, then, does he dedicate a whole article to gambling, and what does it mean for us today?

Retrospectively, this article seems to portend the 1929 financial crisis, whose consequences for the rise of fascism and anti-semitism Lévy-Bruhl will attentively follow. It also resonates with the novel of Dostoevsky, *The gambler*, published in 1866 in Saint Petersburg and in 1887 in Paris—at a time when Lévy-Bruhl was writing about realism and socialism in literary journals. The general argument of the article—that the “pure gambler” is driven by emotions that can be compared to those expressed in “primitive societies”—indeed resonates with observations of gamblers in Russia in 1860 or America in 1930. But Lévy-Bruhl reacts to a situation he has observed as an engaged philosopher in France during the First World War. If Lévy-Bruhl has been criticized for being an “armchair anthropologist”—even though this accusation is unfair since he traveled intensively to non-European societies after the war—his experience of the war in France changed his reflection on humankind.

Lévy-Bruhl’s first ethnological book, after a series of books on the history of French and German philosophy, was entitled *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* and was published in 1910. It followed the 1905 law on the separation between the Church and the State, which marked the end of the Dreyfus Affair, perceived by all actors engaged as a fight between secular academic scientists and catholic military officers around the accusation of treason based on the interpretation of a written paper—the famous “bordereau” which leaked French military secrets to the German army, and which had not been written by Dreyfus but by another officer (Burns 1992). In this book, Lévy-Bruhl compared “the primitive” to those who believe in catholic dogmas such as the Trinity, and contrasted them with scientists who analyze facts based on experience. Lévy-Bruhl famously stated that “primitive mentality” was ruled by a principle of participation, which tolerates that “A is non-A,” while “civilized mentality” was ruled by a principle of contradiction, which refuses such assertions (Lévy-Bruhl 1910: 55). As Marcel Proust famously noted in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the Dreyfus Affair opposed two “mentalities” between which individuals could shift as in a “kaleidoscope” (Proust 1999: 412,

891)—an image that Lévi-Strauss borrows when he himself contrasts “savage mind” (*pensée sauvage*) and “domesticated mind” (Lévi-Strauss 1962 : 51).

In 1922, Lévy-Bruhl no longer compares “the primitive” with the catholic who thinks that God can be two persons at the same time, or that Dreyfus can be guilty and innocent at the same time—this is how Jaurès criticized the army in 1898 (Jaurès 1998)—but to the gambler who passionately engages in betting on the future. The problem is no longer cognition—numeration, calculation, memory—but divination: dreams, omens, and games. It is no longer collective representations that contradict the principle of participation—like the famous “Bororo are parakeets” proposition, which Lévy-Bruhl borrowed from the Xingu ethnography of Von den Steinen and interpreted in a Durkheimian fashion as a totemic statement (Keck 2008)—but signs of the future which lead to mystical perceptions of invisible entities. Another example of this phenomenon is the one observed by Evans-Pritchard, when a man who trips over a stone he walks by every day, and this time injures himself, thinks that he is bewitched (Evans-Pritchard 1965).

Why does Lévy-Bruhl operate such a shift in his ethnological thinking between 1910 and 1922? In 1914, after the assassination of Jean Jaurès, with whom he was very close after his support to the cause of Dreyfus and his foundation of *L’Humanité*—to which Lévy-Bruhl contributed financially—a team of sociologists were engaged in the Ministry of the Army under the supervision of Albert Thomas, a historian of the Socialist Party and deputy of the Parliament. Among these were Lucien Lévy-Bruhl but also Maurice Halbwachs and François Simiand, who had studied economics and sociology under the guidance of Emile Durkheim. Their role was to establish statistics of the French industry, to reorient it toward contributing to the war effort. It was, in their own terms, to prepare for an unexpected event: the duration of a war in which different kinds of actors progressively engaged, modifying the stakes and strategies as the conflict unfolded. The global war itself could thus be compared to a big game in which actors engaged without knowing in advance the costs and benefits.

This analysis distinguished Lévy-Bruhl from the two most prominent philosophers of his generation: Henri Bergson and Emile Durkheim. In his speeches on the war, Bergson opposed “a force that endures” to “a force that uses itself”; he thus explained why the French army could resist the attack of the German army, and justified his mission to convince President Wilson to engage the



United States in the war on the side of France and Great Britain (Soulez 1989). In a widely circulated text, Durkheim opposed a “German mentality,” characterized by a pathological form of idealism, to a “French mentality,” in which the State leaves some expression to individual consciousness (Durkheim and Karsenti 2015). Lévy-Bruhl, surprisingly, never used dualistic oppositions to describe what happened during the war. Instead, he analyzed the causes of the war as a series of wrong decisions by individuals who gambled on the future with insufficient information—an analysis that has some parallels in the works of John Maynard Keynes, whom Lévy-Bruhl probably knew through his friend Léon Blum, although he never quoted him.

This difference between three types of intervention during the war casts light on three interpretations of “primitive mentality.” For Durkheim (1912), “primitive mentality” is not prelogical, but is a form of mental and social organization which determines sanctions through repressive categories, in a way that becomes milder with the advent of individualism. Hence the critique that the Durkheimians will address to Lévy-Bruhl: you forgot social organizations and you built a gap between two mentalities. However, the Durkheimians returned to a form of evolutionism which Lévy-Bruhl criticized, when they argued that individualistic societies are superior to what Louis Dumont will call holistic societies (Bouglé 1929). For Bergson (1932), Lévy-Bruhl is wrong to state that “primitive mentality ignores chance,” because chance is an invention of “civilized societies”: there is no such thing as “chance” for a hunter who invokes the spirit of a prey or of another animal to magically ensure the success of the hunt. Hence the distinction Bergson makes between “static religions”—in which he includes “primitive societies,” but also all forms of reasoning faced with the possibility of disaster, such as William James invoking the spirit of the San Francisco earthquake—and “dynamic religions.” The latter comprise, for Bergson, the creation of institutions by mystical heroes, such as of the League of Nations by Woodrow Wilson (Keck 2012).

In his article on gambling, Lévy-Bruhl makes an ethnological argument against the critiques which have been addressed to him by philosophers such as Bergson, and sociologists such as Durkheim. He says that while “primitive societies” ignore chance—in the modern sense of risk calculation—they have institutions which play the same role as statistics in societies where the State is not the main actor in social organization. These are

games of divination which allow societies to foresee the future and prepare for risky enterprises. Lévy-Bruhl quotes this striking sentence from men playing bones, reported by a missionary from Transvaal: “But this is our book! We don’t have any other! You read your book every day because you believe in it; we do the same thing because we have faith in our book!” This quotation can be juxtaposed to the famous quote brought back from New Caledonia by Maurice Leenhardt, another missionary who worked intensely with Lévy-Bruhl: “We’ve always known about the spirit. What you have brought was the body” (Clifford 1982: 172). “Primitive societies” have institutions to prepare for future events, but by contrast with the model of the Bible, these institutions cannot be encompassed in a single framework where all rules are written down: they are games whose rules can constantly change based on daily negotiations. Durkheim ignored these societies which don’t rely on the State or the Church to organize their daily lives: his model of “primitive societies” are Australian Aboriginal groups, which practice sacrifices in their territories. Bergson ignored the role of institutions in societies of hunter-gatherers, and hence the necessity to socially prepare for the hunt: his model of the hunter is a solitary man invoking the spirit of the prey. Lévy-Bruhl describes how hunters, through their shamans, prepare for uncertain encounters with their prey through the perception of the signs they send.

Why does Lévy-Bruhl represent such a distinctive thought, somewhere between Durkheim and Bergson, after the First World War? My interpretation is that his engagement in the Dreyfus Affair since the very beginning of the story—he was a witness to his cousin-in-law during his first trial in Paris in 1894, and he attended his second trial in Rennes in 1898, motivating many dreyfusard intellectuals to join him in his conviction that Dreyfus was innocent—made a strong difference between him and his two schoolmates at the École Normale, who followed the Affair from a distance. Bergson didn’t say a word on the scandal although he lived in Paris and was perfectly aware of the new wave of antisemitism, and from Bordeaux Durkheim wrote an article to defend “the individualism of intellectuals” when the dreyfusards were accused by the army.

What is a game, in Lévy-Bruhl’s understanding? It is an institution through which a society prepares for an uncertain future without relying on written rules but rather by convening around shared scenarios. The whole question of the Dreyfus Affair was whether Dreyfus



could be accused on the basis of a written document, or whether he could be considered guilty based on a scenario launched by antisemitic thinkers such as Edouard Drumont. In the first part of his ethnological thinking, Lévy-Bruhl fought against the army to oppose “societies without writing”—we can borrow here Lévi-Strauss’s famous refashioning of Leenhardt’s position at the École Pratique des Hautes Études into a chair in “Religions of uncivilized societies” to be contrasted with a chair in “societies with writing.” But when he worked with the army to convert French industry to the war effort, Lévy-Bruhl realized that “primitive mentality” was the most common resource to prepare for an uncertain future. Hence the comparison he makes between the “primitive man,” the passionate gambler, and the military officer. In his wartime notebooks, Lévy-Bruhl writes: “expect the unexpected, and prepare everything to channel and conduct it” (*s’attendre à l’imprévu, et tout préparer pour le canaliser et le diriger*). My interpretation is the following: while Dreyfus was accused by the army with arguments whose rationality was borrowed from magic and witchcraft, and the dreyfusards had to use the rationality of the Enlightenment to defend him, Lévy-Bruhl and his fellow socialists had to “think like primitives” when they engaged in the war.

Are we ready to play that game again?

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