

Structuralism

SECOND EDITION

John Sturrock

*With a new introduction
by Jean-Michel Rabaté*

 **Blackwell**
Publishing

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We must therefore be guided by what is common to all. The Logos is common to all, yet the multitude lives as if each had his own intelligence.

Heraclitus

Introduction 2003: Are You History?

Jean-Michel Rabaté

Habermas read the first version of his essay ‘Modernity – an Unfinished Project’ in September 1980. This was his official discourse of thanks upon receiving the Adorno Prize in Frankfurt. Derrida received the same prize twenty-one years later, to be precise in September 2001, when he was granted a distinction that clashes with Habermas’s sense of priorities but marks perhaps a closure, if not a reconciliation. Whatever one thinks of the closure of this loop or time-warp, since partisanship has been strong at least in English-speaking countries, it signals unambiguously that it is high time to reassess Structuralism. This simple task laid out at the beginning of the new millennium is not just timely, it is historical, and should confirm a guess that Universal History may repeat itself by slightly varying on a few basic metaphors, as Borges once remarked. This is why the best starting point is the reissuing of a book first published in 1986, a book that provided as much a user-friendly introduction as an assessment of the varied methods and lines of inquiry associated with Structuralism, at a time when the movement itself had begun to fade and was rumoured to be ‘history’. I would like to offer an even wider scope for this history, and suggest first of all that, contrary to all appearances, this history has not ended. The crucial question one should then pose would be less that of the chronicler (what was it?, meaning: who, when and where was it?) or the cultural historian (what has it all been, a ripple, a mere blip or a deeper trend?), than that of the philosopher: what *is* it?

This republication is timely in the context of the double Adorno prize I have evoked: the impetus animating Habermas’s 1980 speech as well as the subsequent publication of the influential *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (published in 1985, with the English translation in 1987) was a violent critique of French ‘neo-Structuralism’ which contained a systematic refutation of Derrida’s thought (more than of his writings). It is important

to note that the term 'neo-Structuralism' never became current in English. What was preferred was 'post-Structuralism', a term also coined in the late 1970s in the wake of the many 'posts' invented then (post-modernism was to appear more durably successful, although it too has lost its lustre). Let us imagine what might have happened if the British and Americans had been using 'neo-Structuralism' instead of 'post-Structuralism': instead of the forced inscription of history into the 'school' gathered by the -ism and the concomitant illusion of having superseded an older and exhausted movement, there would have been a sense of compromise and inter-disciplinary dilution; instead of overcoming and violently obliterating methods that appeared limited when based upon unpleasant ideologies, there would have been the notion of gentler diffusion, of broader cultural dissemination. In fact, the concepts of 'neo-Structuralism' and 'post-Structuralism' overlap almost completely; this can be verified by the roll-call of authors criticized by Habermas: after Nietzsche and Heidegger, he names Derrida, Bataille, Foucault and Castoriadis. In Habermas's account nevertheless, it is Derrida who figures as the main suspect of a dangerously pervasive levelling of the 'genre distinction between Philosophy and Literature'.¹ However, the same Derrida is also presented as the gravedigger of Structuralism, and we will have to make sense of the inner duplicity of these neo-and post-prefixes when applied to Structuralism.

My general contention is that we can apply Habermas's idea of an 'unfinished project of modernity' not to the entire rationality deriving from the Enlightenment and its aborted or distorted projection of 'light' into past or present darkness, but to what appears today retrospectively as one of the most important, if not the dominant, philosophical trends of the twentieth century. This would be true at least of France alone, since Structuralism has been the philosophy that France has exported with most success internationally (which explains Habermas's worried reaction) with the possible exception of Existentialism, although I would be ready to argue that Existentialism was more 'a fashion, a morality, a passion' – to quote Baudelaire, defining the 'transient' or ephemeral part of his concept of modernity – than a true philosophy. Or rather, to anticipate slightly what will follow, I would say that the French philosopher who appears as the most emblematic of the last century, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, derives much of his eminence to the fact that he alone was able to bridge the gap between Existentialism and Structuralism in the name of a 'neo-structural' version of phenomenology. It is no accident that his first major philosophical treatise, entitled *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) was followed in 1953 by *The Structure of Behavior*.²

Like Existentialism, indeed, Structuralism was soon to turn into a mere fashion (it was a time when Paris was still the world capital specializing in

the exportation of *la nouvelle mode*, both sartorially and intellectually), and this is what gave more edge and poignancy to rejections coming from hostile philosophers like Habermas whose ties with the Frankfurt school would predispose him unfavourably to any kind of 'irrational scientism', a strange oxymoron that captures the doubly negative view of German critics who attempted to classify Structuralism, or from early fellow-travellers of the movement turned debunkers, like Foucault. In a notoriously dismissive account of a school of thought he had been associated with in the press at least (he was one of the four participants in what was dubbed "the Structuralist banquet", along with Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, and Barthes), Foucault opposes the patience of true thinking to a purely modish enthusiasm. Taking up again Kant's critical project, but without begging the issue of rationalism like Habermas, Foucault presents Structuralism as the *Schwärmerei* of a generation fascinated by scientific models, all too eager to shy away from the politicization or moralization of intellectual life brought about by Sartre and his friends (who, of course, had before and after the craze shrilly denounced Structuralism as a petty bourgeois ideology opposed to humanistic commitment). In a sweeping revision that smacks of recantation, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* acknowledges in 1969 that its author had unduly stressed discursive or epistemic synchronicity at the expense of human agency. The impact of the 'events' of May 1968 has no doubt been felt. In 1969, Foucault reduces Structuralism to a mere fabrication by mediatized hype, a juvenile temptation, a sin that has been exorcized through a relentless dialogue with himself:

...I did not want to carry the structuralist enterprise beyond its legitimate limits. And you must admit that I never once used the word 'structure' in *The Order of Things*. But let us leave our polemics about 'structuralism'; they hardly survive in areas now deserted by serious workers; this particular controversy, which might have been so fruitful, is now acted out only by mimes and tumblers.³

One may be wary of playing the part of a mime and tumbler, especially now that the circus show has been over for so long, even if it was only to grasp how Foucault's dialogical conclusion multiplies contortions and somersaults with one calculated aim, that is to 'dissociate himself from structuralism'.⁴ In this dialogue with an *advocatus diaboli* who keeps returning to the vexed issue of Structuralism, Foucault admits to a convergence of methods, strategies, descriptions, analyses, formalizations, schemata, themes, mechanisms – in short the whole array of technical procedures associated with Structuralism – but refuses to grant it the status

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of a philosophy. Or if philosophy it is, it is a shallow one, too close to a positivism marked by a naïve belief in scientific progress that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Foucault's archaeology will try to force this global methodology to account for its hidden historical dimension, making it reveal its larger concerns and implicit agendas:

Of course, we have had to abandon all those discourses that once led us to the sovereignty of consciousness. But what we have lost over the last half-century, we are hoping to recover in the second degree, by means of the analysis of those analyses, or at least by the fundamental questioning that we apply to them. We will ask them where they came from, towards what historical destination they are moving without being aware of it, what naivety blinds them to the conditions that make them possible, and what metaphysical enclosure encloses their rudimentary positivism.⁵

The disclosure of Foucault's subsequent programme may come as a surprise for all those who associate post-Structuralism with a criticism of the concepts of origins and subjectivity:

That is why, if we must tolerate all those structuralisms, whether we like it or not, we will not allow any taint to that history of thought that is our own history; we will not allow the unraveling of those transcendental threads that have bound it since the nineteenth century to the problem of origin and subjectivity.⁶

I will return to Foucault's sudden transformation from an advocate of Structuralist methods in 1966 to a very vocal detractor in 1969. His reliance on a longer metaphysical history reminds us of the need for a reliable history of a movement that we can no longer understand in isolation, which is why Sturrock's elegant and informed survey proves invaluable: one of the strengths of his account is his attention to hidden convergences and deeper evolutions. History needs to be evaluative as well as event-oriented, as Nietzsche insisted. We do have a very precise and thorough chronicle in François Dosse's monumental recapitulation.⁷ But because he is a professional historian, and French moreover, he is reluctant to make the kind of imaginative mental leap performed by Sturrock, who replaces linear history with synthetic regrouping while depicting a longer history. Since I do not wish to repeat either Sturrock or Dosse here, I will suggest two axes: I will sketch a philosophical history that takes the whole twentieth century into account, and then I will become almost myopic and focus on a particular year, 1966. This year is seen as a turning point by Dosse, but it is however more than relevant for the reception of Structuralism in America and the

English-speaking countries, and we need to examine this moment with more attention.

Structuralism Between Ontology and Epistemology

Sturrock could not begin elsewhere than with linguistics, more precisely Ferdinand de Saussure's groundbreaking transformation of linguistics into a systemic theory of language in its daily use, and not, as it used to be before, straight philology, or the investigation of historical transformations of single words, at times replaced in their families. However, the idea of an 'unfinished program' sends us to philosophy as a possible foundation, and there it may come as a mild surprise that Husserl should be called up at some length by Sturrock. Most accounts of Structuralism tend to portray it as the radical enemy of any philosophy of consciousness, therefore of phenomenology, a study of the way in which consciousness constitutes a world. In fact, Sturrock is quite consistent when he points to a deep affinity or to an objective alliance between Husserl's rigorous description of the varied inter-meshings of consciousness and the world and Structuralism. In Husserl's investigation of mathematics, for instance, the issue of the 'ideality' of mathematical objects sends us not to a purely historical tradition but to a 'structure' already intuited by its mythical first inventors (see p. 50). As Derrida was to note in a wonderfully astute commentary,⁸ the objectivity of mathematics, like that of all sciences, cannot be grounded in subjectivity; it cannot be found in a pure tradition, since Husserl is afraid of falling into the pit of historicism or culturalism; it is in the structure of language, which preserves this ideality in the form of univocal statements so as to pass them on through generations, that a solution can be found.

The epistemological complications brought about by the necessary 'reduction' of ambiguity to univocity are examined in an exacting but empathic revision of phenomenology by Derrida, even if I cannot enter into the detail of his analysis here. Suffice it to note that the term 'structure' intervenes at more than one strategic point in Husserl's account of the interwoven strands of knowledge and culture from his first book, *The Philosophy of Arithmetic* (1891) to the posthumously published *Experience and Judgment* (1938). Husserl's attempt at founding logical categories within human intuition refuses any compromise with Dilthey's historicism and his idea of *Geisteswissenschaften* as being too tainted with either subjectivism or sociologism. Structure was therefore a term that imposed itself in the effort to think rigorously about the way things or events get inscribed in a consciousness proposing grids or patterns without which they would not even appear. In

order to get rid of the psychologism that still adheres to his first book, Husserl will soon insist on the uncanny structural correspondence between the very abstract logical universals and the grammatical categories provided by language. In his last synthesis on judgement, he uses the concept of 'structure' to move beyond particular judgements toward the universal: 'From this exposition of the original givenness of a universal content "in general", it is evident that the universal *being thus "in general" is a higher structural form which includes in its sense the idea of a particular "in general"* and raises it to a higher form.'⁹

What is a structure, then, for Husserl, and 'in general'? The broadest definition is that a structure is an abstract model of organization, including a set of elements and the law of their composition. Even when the nature of these elements varies considerably, what matters is the inner coherence of the whole. The elements may be atomic clusters in a snowflake, totemic identifications underpinning circuits of exchange of women in an Amerindian tribe, or a network of images playing in counterpoint through a sonnet; what stands out in a structure is that the relationships between the elements are more important than the intrinsic qualities of each element. In Husserlian phenomenology, as in Saussurean linguistics, the genesis of individualities is subsumed under the global idea of the system. Genetic randomness and empirical chaos have been replaced by the imposition of an order whose ideality underpins the very notion of classification.

With Saussure and Husserl we may safely leave the ontological status of such structures between brackets because we have practised the *epoché* of phenomenological reduction leading to eidetic essences, or because we have reduced the noise of actual linguistic utterances to vectors or axes of combination and selection. If structures can be left hovering between the objective and the subjective poles since language remains a universal constituent of human nature, what happens when we are made aware that we have been talking so far about 'being in general'? This is where Heidegger's meditation on ontological difference takes its point of departure, more precisely with a book that is still in debt to phenomenology but subverts it radically, *Being and Time*. Even a hurried reader will notice that Heidegger moves in a few pages from an investigation of the 'Formal Structure [*Struktur*] of the Question of Being' (the title of paragraph 2), which takes into account the hermeneutical circle generated by that most general but not so 'self-evident' concept (Being), to a more aggressive agenda, 'The Task of a Destructuring [*Destruktion*] of the History of Ontology' (title of paragraph 6).¹⁰ The destructive program is stated quite explicitly:

If the question of being is to achieve clarity regarding its own history, a loosening of the sclerotic tradition and a dissolving of the concealments produced by it is necessary. We understand this task as the deconstructing of the traditional concepts of ancient ontology which is to be carried out along the guidelines of the question of being.¹¹

This is not the place for a discussion of Heidegger's masterpiece, and I will limit my remarks to a semantic level: whenever he writes *Destruktion*, the translator has rejected the more direct equivalent of 'destruction' and preferred 'destruction'. Heidegger also used the more German *Abbau* (literally 'un-construction') but *Destruktion* recurs quite often in *Being and Time*.¹² It is a wise choice to avoid 'destruction', in so far as Heidegger insists upon the positive side of a critique which should not be confused with a relativist debunking of worn out metaphysical traditions. He aims both at rereading a whole tradition caught up in Greek 'structures' at least since Plato and Aristotle, and opening onto a phenomenology of modern subjectivity approached via the existing person or *Dasein*, literally a 'being-there' whose very etymological roots somehow contain or beg the issue of Being (*Sein*). Thus we encounter tactically central uses of 'structure': Heidegger will speak of a 'temporalization-structure', of 'end-structures' and 'fore-structures' that all converge in the more complexly intertwined 'structural totality of being-in-the-world'. Thus, if as Sturrock correctly surmises, the real proto- or ur-Structuralist is not de Saussure but Husserl, Heidegger appears as the first post-Structuralist, and like all post-Structuralists, he too needs the concept of structure to proceed with his constructive destruction or 'de-structuration'.

Can this apply to Derrida when he takes a slightly different critical turn in the wake of Heidegger's phenomenology of *Dasein* as embodying ontological difference? Just as Heidegger could not proceed with his *Destruktion* without having first posited the *Struktur* of the question of Being, Derrida could not progress in his confrontation with the metaphysical erasure of written language, a language that must be seen as revealing the essence of technology through its dependence on real or possible writing, if he did not have a workable concept of linguistic difference. Derrida's initial philosophical strategy has consisted in revisiting Heidegger's deconstruction of phenomenology by opposing one kind of Structuralism – Husserlian phenomenology and its wish to provide a rigorous foundation for the linked idealities of science, history and culture – to another structuralism, Saussure's linguistics of relations, codes, systems and binary oppositions deprived of substance. His revisionist gesture has been to read Husserl with Saussure, so that whenever Husserl appears deaf to the issue of language, or

uses a metaphysically transparent view of language, it is Saussure who is called upon to provide a conception of language as a system devoid of ontological weight, as entirely made up of mutual relations, therefore of pure differences. Conversely, Husserl will be called upon to provide a rigorous philosophical countermodel whenever Structuralism seems to blind itself deliberately to issues of origins and teleology, of event and production, of constitution and purposive meaning. Structuralism is then seen as a game of blind man's buff with the very notion of structurality.

This seemed to be the case with the hard view of Structuralism put forward by Lévi-Strauss in the 1950s, a view in which Derrida identifies a return to positivism or scientism. What is wrong with this scientism is not its faith in science, but that the gesture that believes it can work with structures as if they were just found objects lying in wait for a new scientific investigation will inevitably repeat the history of metaphysical delusions it pretends to avoid: Derrida's strictures are forceful, and should not be limited to Lévi-Strauss, but put in question the history of the 'structurality of structure', a history as ancient as that of metaphysics. Its very deployment entails rethinking a long list of concepts such as sign, form, essence, history, nature, truth, culture and so on. Or to be more precise, Derrida points out that structuralist anthropology never chooses between a purely empirical approach and a recurrent critique of empiricism. Using the term chosen by Lévi-Strauss to describe his own activity, *bricolage*, as a way of meditating between empiricism and dogmatism, Derrida warns him sternly:

What I want to emphasize is simply that the passage beyond philosophy does not consist in turning the page of philosophy (which usually amounts to philosophizing badly), but in continuing to read philosophers *in a certain way*. . . . I have said that empiricism is the matrix of all faults menacing a discourse which continues, as with Lévi-Strauss in particular, to consider itself scientific. If we wanted to pose the problem of empiricism and *bricolage* in depth, we would probably end up very quickly with a number of absolutely contradictory propositions concerning the status of discourse in structural anthropology.¹³

For instance, Derrida notes that Lévi-Strauss's structural schemata of kinship relations or creation myths are adduced as mere hypotheses allowing anthropologists to introduce some order into the baffling diversity of human practices. Empirical diversity is soon subsumed under an epistemic totalization provided by structures that fall under the category of universals, or foundational constituents of the human mind reaching even into unconscious thought, and finally stabilizing themselves precariously between

nature and culture, as the name of the very divide between nature and culture.

This is of course only the beginning of a long and fruitful discussion that I could not sum up adequately here. It starts when Derrida announces both an 'event' taking the form of a rupture within the continuous web of structures and a 'redoubling' of the structure upon itself.¹⁴ Many commentators have stressed the 'event' of a rupture, and they have looked to the 'events' of May 1968 as a convenient watershed, forgetting that, even if Derrida's gesture had started post-Structuralism, it would have done so two years at least before May 1968. I am inclined to stress the second element, namely repetition or redoubling, and see in the critical returning or folding of structurality upon itself a necessary critical accompaniment of Structuralism. At any rate, there might be reason for the fact that this frontal attack or redoubling commentary should have been launched on neutral ground, if not exactly 'foreign' territory, since both Derrida and Lévi-Strauss had already spent some time in the United States, when a major conference on the human sciences gave the opportunity for a general discussion of Structuralism. I will now try to analyse more precisely the context of this historical 'event'.

Baltimore 1966

As François Dosse notes in his chronicle of French Structuralism, the year 1966 marked a climax leading to a turning point;¹⁵ in France, the publication of two theoretical best-sellers, Lacan's *Écrits* and Foucault's *The Order of Things*, seemed to confirm the dominance of the movement in intellectual life, while in the United States the Johns Hopkins conference of October 1966 gathered Barthes, Lacan, Derrida, Goldmann, Vernant, Todorov and Hyppolite, a group of distinguished scholars who were invited to explain Structuralism and its discontents to an American audience. The two volumes successively edited from these proceedings evince a curious ambivalence in the chiasmic exchange of their titles. We move from the triumphant, even bombastically redoubled plural, *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* whose last gallic phrase literalizes *les sciences humaines*, to the more context-bound and cautious singular of *The Structuralist Controversy*.¹⁶ The apparently innocent decision to inverse title and subtitle incites fresh questionings while opening the scene onto a more public debate. The new preface written in 1971 spells out what was barely palpable in 1966, and could only be missed by the American public, namely the lack of an ideological pact or a common theoretical position among the