ANTISEMITISM AND THE DESIRE OF THE STRUCTURLIST[1]

Yehuda Israely

Introduction

In 1942, two pivotal intellectual figures—Roman Jakobson, the linguist, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, the anthropologist—met in New York under extraordinary circumstances. Both were Jewish exiles from Nazi-occupied Europe, Jakobson fleeing the Russian regime and Lévi-Strauss escaping the horrors of the Nazi occupation of France. Building on Ferdinand de Saussure's discoveries in linguistics. These two scholars would go on to lay the groundwork for structuralism, a theoretical approach that would transform linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. Their exile, displacement, and the profound experience of antisemitism shaped their intellectual pursuits, providing a crucial backdrop for their groundbreaking ideas.

This article argues that the intellectual developments that led to the formulation of structural theory—culminating in its influence on Lacanian psychoanalysis—are deeply intertwined with the experiences of antisemitism and persecution that these thinkers endured. The horrors of nationalism, the Holocaust, and pervasive antisemitism left an indelible mark on their intellectual projects. More importantly, their responses to these historical forces were not only intellectual but ethical, providing a framework for structural theory that seeks to transcend the hierarchies of race, culture, and mental health. The structuralist project that emerged was, in part, a way of confronting these legacies of oppression by offering a vision of human culture and subjectivity that was universal, non-hierarchical, and fundamentally anti-essentialist.

Structuralist critique of Western superiority

The mid-twentieth century was a period of profound upheaval and transformation, marked by the devastation of World War II and the Holocaust. These events not only reshaped the geopolitical landscape but also had a profound impact on intellectual thought. The displacement and persecution experienced by Jewish intellectuals like Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss were emblematic of a broader crisis of identity and belonging. This crisis catalysed a re-evaluation of existing paradigms, leading to the emergence of structuralism as a response to the ethnocentric and hierarchical ideologies that had dominated Western thought. By challenging these ideologies, structuralism offered a new framework for understanding human culture and subjectivity, one that was inherently anti-essentialist and anti-hierarchical. This paper is unique in focusing on a direct link between antisemitism and structuralism, the focus on the ethical dimension of structuralism, the paradigm of a rhizome as a link between anthropological and political thought. The aim is to demonstrate how structuralism in anthropology and psychoanalysis have a shared ethical commitment to transcend cultural and racial hierarchies.

The development of structuralism after World War II was not a purely academic endeavour; it was deeply informed by the historical context of its time. The intellectual climate of the postwar

[1] This article is based the author's forthcoming book *The Myth of Psychoanalysis – Freud, Lacan and Levi-Strauss* (London: Routledge).

period, marked by exile, trauma, and the legacy of fascism, created the conditions for a theoretical perspective that sought to dismantle the ethnocentric assumptions that had long governed Western intellectual thought. Structuralism, as developed by Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss, emerged as a powerful critique of the arrogance embedded in Western intellectual traditions, which had for centuries viewed non-Western cultures as inferior, irrational, or even subhuman (Levi-Strauss 1963).

In anthropology, Lévi-Strauss's structuralism was a radical departure from earlier, functionalist approaches. Where earlier anthropologists sought to find meaning in individual cultural artifacts—such as the totem of a tribe or the rituals of an indigenous group—Lévi-Strauss argued that meaning arises from the relationships between elements within a cultural system. For Lévi-Strauss, myths, customs, and social structures were not isolated or self-contained entities but part of a larger system of meaning, one that could be understood through structural analysis. This approach democratized culture in much the same way that Freud had democratized the psyche. Just as Freud had shown that the unconscious is not reserved for the mentally ill but is shared by all human beings (Freud SE VI 1960 [1901]), Lévi-Strauss argued that the structures of meaning underlying all cultures are fundamentally similar. This insight was both a direct challenge to the ethnocentrism of previous anthropological approaches and a critique of Western cultural superiority.

Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myths (Levi-Strauss 1978) is perhaps the clearest example of this shift. In his work, myths were not treated as primitive expressions of superstition or irrationality but as complex systems of meaning that could be understood within a structural framework. Myths, like language, are composed of elements that only acquire significance through their relationships with one another. By applying the insights of linguistics—particularly Jakobson's theory of the arbitrary nature of the phoneme—Lévi-Strauss demonstrated that the seemingly illogical or chaotic elements of indigenous mythologies were in fact highly structured and meaningful.

Through this lens, Lévi-Strauss redefined the way we think about culture. In place of the dominant Western conception of a linear progression from 'primitive' to 'advanced', he introduced a vision of cultural exchange that is non-hierarchical and rhizomatic, wherein all cultures are seen as connected through complex networks of meaning. This shift in perspective, which rejected notions of cultural superiority, was rooted not only in intellectual rigor but in the lived experiences of exile and persecution that both Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss had undergone as Jewish refugees from anti-Semitic Europe.

Jakobson's structural linguistics: the birth of structuralism

The intellectual journey that led to the structuralist revolution began with Roman Jakobson's work in linguistics. Jakobson's most significant contribution was his discovery of the structural nature of meaning in language. In his work, Jakobson showed that meaning is not inherent in individual words or signs but arises from the relationships between those signs. Words are made meaningful not by their intrinsic properties, but by their position within a system of oppositions (Jakobson 1960). The famous example of Jakobson's theory is the relationship between the phonemes in spoken language: the sounds of speech are arbitrary, but they gain meaning through their combination into words and sentences.

Jakobson's insight into the arbitrary nature of meaning has profound implications. If meaning is not inherent in individual words or signs, then the whole system of language—and by extension, culture—can be understood as a network of signs in which meaning arises from the

relationships between elements. For Jakobson, the most fundamental opposition in language is the contrast between presence and absence. In this framework, meaning is always relational: the meaning of a word is defined not by its inherent properties but by its difference from other words, its presence in relation to what is absent. This relational view of meaning would become the cornerstone of structuralism as it developed across various fields.

For Lévi-Strauss, Jakobson's theory provided the key to understanding the structure of myths. Just as the meaning of a word arises from its relationships to other words, the meaning of a myth arises from the relationships between the elements within it. Myths are composed of arbitrary elements—such as animals, gods, and other symbols—that acquire meaning only when placed in opposition to one another. For example, the jaguar and the armadillo in a myth may represent opposing social forces or human qualities, but these meanings only emerge through their contrast. Lévi-Strauss's structuralism thus extended Jakobson's insights into the domain of culture and society, demonstrating that the same principles that govern language also govern the organization of cultural and social systems.

This insight was groundbreaking. It allowed Lévi-Strauss to analyse indigenous myths not as primitive or irrational expressions but as highly structured systems that functioned according to universal principles of meaning. In this way, Lévi-Strauss's work undermined the colonialist and racist assumptions that had long governed anthropological thinking, which treated non-Western cultures as irrational or inferior. By demonstrating that all cultures operate according to the same structural principles, Lévi-Strauss was able to argue for the fundamental equality of all cultures, a position that was both intellectually radical and ethically profound.

Freud, Lévi-Strauss, and the structure of the unconscious

The intellectual breakthroughs of Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss were deeply informed by Freud's psychoanalysis. Freud's conception of the unconscious as a system of repressed desires and hidden meanings has a direct parallel in Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology. Just as Freud demonstrated that the symptoms of mental illness have an internal logic and meaning, Lévi-Strauss showed that myths and cultural practices also have a structure that can be deciphered. In both cases, meaning arises not from the surface level of phenomena but from their underlying structure.

Freud's work with neurotic patients, such as his treatment of Anna O. (Freud SE II 1955 [1895]), demonstrated that symptoms could be understood as a form of speech—an expression of unconscious desires and conflicts. Just as Jakobson's linguistic theory showed that meaning arises from the relationships between arbitrary signs, Freud's psychoanalysis revealed that symptoms derive their meaning from the unconscious structures that shape them. In a similar vein, Lévi-Strauss showed that myths, which had long been dismissed as irrational or primitive, could be understood as complex systems of meaning that arose from the relationships between symbols.

Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, like Freud's psychoanalysis, emphasized the importance of recognizing the unconscious structures that shape human behaviour. Both Freud and Lévi-Strauss were deeply influenced by the recognition that human beings are not the masters of their own fate but are shaped by unconscious forces and cultural structures. Freud's humility in acknowledging the limits of human agency found a parallel in Lévi-Strauss's recognition that human culture is not the product of individual genius but of deep, underlying structures that operate independently of conscious will.

The desire of the structuralist: anti-hierarchical and anti-essentialist

At its core, structuralism is not merely a theoretical framework but an ethical stance against the injustices of cultural and racial hierarchies. By emphasizing the relational structures that underpin human societies, structuralism advocates for a more egalitarian and inclusive understanding of cultural differences. Through its commitment to universal structures, structuralism challenges the notion of cultural superiority and promotes a vision of human diversity that is both respectful and celebratory.

What must the linguist, anthropologist, or psychoanalyst undergo in order to develop the capacity for a structuralist perspective? More specifically, what desire should have driven Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, or Lacan to study the structures of language, each in their respective field, from a structural, systemic, and contextual standpoint?

Desire, in the Lacanian sense, is not merely a wish; it functions as an operating system, akin to the plot of a hero in a myth. In this context, structuralist desire encompasses logical, even mathematical, ethical, and psychological dimensions. It is like an ecology in which one lives—a symbolic habitat, similar to Heidegger's concept of *Umwelt*.

If we were to ask Jakobson about his desire, he would argue that despite being a student of Russian formalism, a school that forms the foundation of structuralism, he nonetheless differentiates himself from the passion that drove Trubetzkoy, the first formalist who had a profound influence on him.

Nikolai Sergeyevich Trubetzkoy was a prime example of the ethnocentric colonialism that permeated European anthropology during the interwar period. Trubetzkoy was a wunderkind, a genius who began his research at the age of thirteen. He was deeply fascinated by Russian folk tales, particularly intrigued by how motifs from these tales had permeated Finnish myths. As a patriotic Russian aristocrat, he wanted to prove that the wisdom embedded in Finnish folk tales had a Slavic Russian origin. How does this parallel Lévi-Strauss? Both investigated how motifs—the building blocks or units of meaning that constitute myths—travelled across cultures through time and space. Lévi-Strauss, like Trubetzkoy, explored the dissemination of mythic elements, conducting studies on myths from Vancouver to the Amazon, and identifying common motifs with varying cultural nuances. However, while Trubetzkoy was a racist nationalist and imperialist, seeking to prove that Russian culture was the origin of all others, Lévi-Strauss rejected the idea of a single original culture. For Lévi-Strauss, there was no primacy of one culture over another; cultures and myths developed simultaneously across continents, spreading in all directions. In his view, there was no original culture, and thus no culture could be seen merely as a pale imitation of the first.

This was the germ of the anti-fascist nature of structuralism. Jakobson, for his part, distilled formalism from the ethnocentrism that underpins colonialism, fascism, racism, and antisemitism so that Levi-Strauss already got the logically and ethically more sound version. Unlike Trubetzkoy, who sought to demonstrate that folk tales originated in Russia and migrated to Finland to exalt the superiority of Russian culture, Lévi-Strauss did not believe in a singular origin for myths. Myths, he argued, began simultaneously across the Americas and spread outward, suggesting that there was no singular source. Instead of Trubetzkoy's linear thinking, Lévi-Strauss adopted a rhizomatic approach. A rhizome, exemplified by the root system of grass, grows horizontally. In contrast to a tree with a clear direction of growth—roots → trunk → branches → fruit—the roots of a rhizome are interconnected, with no hierarchical, linear progression; each piece of root may be linked to any other. Likewise, the aerial roots of a fig

tree intertwine with one another, connecting to the trunk from which they originated. Myths function in a similar manner—interconnected, with no myth being the 'first' or the 'last'. This was how Lévi-Strauss viewed the way tribes exchanged information and influenced one another. He believed this interconnection explained why myths are so similar at their core, when one learns to read through their various versions. Because the relationship is rhizomatic, the decision to begin analysis with any one myth and treat others as its variations is somewhat arbitrary. To decipher enigmatic elements of a myth, Lévi-Strauss turned to nearby communities, and when he found no explanation, he expanded his search to more distant ones. This rhizomatic conception of myth theory is an anti-fascist, anti-hierarchical paradigm—an ethical dimension of structuralist perspective, which is inherently anti-totalitarian, in its political applications as well.

If we were to ask Lévi-Strauss about the passion driving his structuralist view, he would likely say that it is rooted in humility and the belief that meaning can be deciphered. If we further asked him where he derived the inspiration to engage with indigenous peoples at eye level and decode their myths—understanding that their meanings and logic were no less significant than those of Western cultures—he would point to Freud, who saw both normal and pathological cases as expressions of the same structural principles. If we continue tracing the source of this humane, solidaristic passion and asked Freud himself about the origin of this contagious desire, he would credit it to Jean-Martin Charcot. Freud was deeply impressed by Charcot's humble approach to his patients, in stark contrast to his arrogant demeanour toward his medical colleagues. Lacan, too, shared this quality. For both Freud and Lacan, these characteristics played a crucial role in pushing the boundaries of psychological and psychoanalytic knowledge.

This anti-hierarchical stance was particularly evident in the way that Lévi-Strauss approached the study of indigenous cultures. Where earlier anthropologists had treated indigenous myths as evidence of cultural inferiority, Lévi-Strauss argued that these myths were part of the same structural logic that governed Western culture. By emphasizing the similarities between Western and non-Western cultures, Lévi-Strauss sought to undermine the racist assumptions that had long underpinned the study of anthropology.

Lacan, too, was deeply influenced by the anti-essentialist and anti-hierarchical nature of structuralism. His famous dictum that the unconscious is structured like a language encapsulates the idea that the psyche, like culture and language, is not the product of fixed, essential identities but of relational structures. For Lacan, the unconscious is not a reservoir of hidden truths but a system of signifiers that function according to the same structural principles that govern language and culture. This view of the unconscious as a dynamic, relational system resonates with the structuralist vision of a world in which meaning arises not from fixed essences but from the interplay of opposing forces.

Conclusion: antisemitism, structuralism, and the challenge to Western arrogance

The intellectual contributions of Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Jacques Lacan represent a profound challenge to the ethnocentrism, hierarchy, and essentialism that have long shaped Western intellectual traditions. Through their work, they offered a radical new vision of human culture and subjectivity—one that is anti-hierarchical, non-essentialist, and deeply attuned to the relational structures that govern human life. This vision was not only a theoretical breakthrough but a direct response to the anti-Semitic violence and cultural oppression that marked Jakobson's and Levi-Strauss's lives as Jewish exiles.

In their structuralism, these thinkers sought to move beyond the divisions and hierarchies that have long defined human society. By recognizing the universal structures that underlie language, culture, and the psyche, they provided a powerful antidote to the cultural arrogance that has so often been used to justify oppression and exclusion. In this way, structuralism can be seen as a deeply ethical project—one that seeks to dismantle the hierarchies of race, culture, and mental health, and to create a vision of human experience that is fundamentally inclusive and egalitarian. This has been Levi-Strauss's influence within anthropology.
Structuralism, particularly in its Lacanian form, offers a path forward for psychoanalysis and for the broader human sciences. By embracing the relational nature of meaning and the equality of all cultural or personal expressions, we can move beyond the oppressive structures of Western intellectual tradition and work toward a more just and humane understanding of the human condition.

The legacy of structuralism extends beyond its initial impact on linguistics and anthropology, influencing contemporary debates in cultural studies, sociology, and critical theory. Its emphasis on the interconnectedness of cultural narratives resonates with current discussions on globalization and multiculturalism. By providing a framework that transcends national and cultural boundaries, structuralism continues to inspire scholars to explore the complexities of identity and power in an increasingly interconnected world. This enduring influence underscores the importance of structuralism as a tool for critiquing and reimagining the structures that shape our understanding of human experience.

References

Freud, S. and Breuer, J. (1955) [1895]. *Studies on Hysteria*. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol II (1893-1895) (trans.) J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Freud, S. (1960) [1901]. *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol VI (trans.) J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Jakobson, R. (1960). Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics *Style in Language* 350-77 (ed.) T. A. Sebeok. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963). *Structural Anthropology* (trans.) C. Jackobson and B. Grundfest Schoedf. New York: Basic Books.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1978). *Myth and Meaning*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.