

Françoise Héritier's Activist Structuralism

By Salvatore D'Onofrio

By asserting that structuralism is a fruitful approach to kinship relations or the difference between the sexes, Françoise Héritier radically renewed anthropological methodology. Her life's work has also shown us that scientific commitment goes hand-in-hand with societal involvement.

Much like Claude Lévi-Strauss, in whose footsteps she followed both at the Collège de France and as director of the Laboratoire d'anthropologie sociale, Françoise Héritier became an ethnologist thanks to a series of coincidences. This history and geography graduate nonetheless followed a traditional path. She was sent by Lévi-Strauss to the Upper Volta region to conduct a study on the inhabitants of an area where the French West African government wanted to build a dam. Thus began what would be a 7-year field study in the tropics which had a lasting impact on theoretical approaches in anthropology. For Françoise Héritier, her fieldwork was the locus for the psychological 'change' experienced by all ethnologists and a source to which she always allowed herself to be led, following Lévi-Strauss's suggestion. It was also extremely varied: her work ranged from the Bobo to the Mossi and the Dogon, before she settled with the Samo in Burkina Faso, a people with whom she is rightly associated.

The laws of the mind and the structure in things

Peeling away layer after layer of meaning in her dense Samo ethnographic data, F. Hérítier identified the key topics she would work on for the rest of her life. These can best be summarised using the elegant labels she devised herself: the exercise of kinship, the differential valence of the sexes, the logic of fluids, and the buffers of thought.

Françoise Hérítier's systematic, comparative thinking produced a profound renewal of the structural method. She always claimed her affiliation with this approach, which she defended like an impregnable fortress, and clearly demonstrated its extensive capacity to adapt to the different materials being analysed.

This renewal was grounded on the idea that 'structure is already present in things' and particularly that, irrespective of time or place, human beings have always considered the body and its fluids to be the main foundation of their material and intellectual lives. This 'substantive' perspective, which follows on from her mentor's work, is the defining feature of F. Hérítier's structuralism.

An initial point to be made is that the idea of structure being present in things might seem to be countered by the fact that these things simply reproduce the principles presiding over the workings of the mind, as established by Lévi-Strauss: oppositions, correlations, synthesis, etc. Put differently, could it not be said that F. Hérítier reduced the notion of structure to empirical reality? Does looking for structure in things mean abandoning the idea of studying their unconscious infrastructure? In order to fully explore these questions, it is inevitably to structuralism itself that we must turn.

First and foremost, it should be noted that the structural organisation posited by F. Hérítier does not relate to the nature of the 'facts' being observed. Whether the topic at hand is kinship, the prohibition of incest or 'bodily fluids', their practical function does not imply a different logic from the logic at work in other objects – myths, for example, which we know are more thought than experienced. They are all subject to the same 'operations of the mind'.

Next, it is important to underline that there is no contradiction between structure existing in things (*in objecto*, as it were) and in systems of representation (*in intellectu*). Adopting analytical procedures of a structural nature forces us, sometimes unconsciously, to link the two major aspects of social phenomena that, following Lévi-Strauss, we tend to call the 'sensitive' and the 'intelligible'. F. Hérítier has given many examples of this approach, confirming by the same token that while the premises of structuralism were first applied specifically in anthropology between the 1940s and 1960s, they have in fact always existed because they are inherent to all scientific processes: indeed, Lévi-Strauss reminded us of this in a lecture about the Catalan poet Raymond Lulle in 2005.

One example of this pre-existing structure suffices to illustrate the point. No structural analysis of American-Indian myths using the canonical levi-straussian formula would have been possible had these myths not already been related to one another. When Lévi-Strauss explained that he chose the Oedipal myth as the first example for his analysis due to the ‘striking analogies that seem to exist between certain aspects of archaic Greek thought and that of the Pueblo Indians’,¹ he was quick to point out that he was interpreting it according to the categories through which the American-Indians themselves conceived of their myths. If the field played such an important role for Lévi-Strauss, it is once again important to ask where exactly the notion of structure is located and what it contains.

This is the key to understanding the innovative scope of F. Héritier’s thinking. While Lévi-Strauss spoke about structure, he remained largely focused on the formal aspects of social phenomena. F. Héritier’s approach, however, frames the notion differently. She conceives of structure as present in things. For this reason, it is all the more abstract (perhaps even ‘potential’) because it is displayed by the ‘elementary obvious facts’ of the cultures being observed; undividable facts relating to the biological order (the body) and the natural world (the regularities of the cosmos). For example, we cannot fail to take into account that parents come before children or that all human societies have devised ceremonies that celebrate the periodic renewal of time. This takes us back to the principle of structural analysis that consists in looking for the same kind of formal properties in different kinds of content.

F. Héritier looks for these formal properties in the ‘antithetical dyads’ of universal value that Gerald Holton began to enumerate.² This path has not, however, led her back to the framework of a ‘descriptive physiology’ such as that devised by the British structural-functional anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown.³ To her mind, contrasts such as hot/cold/, dry/wet, superior/inferior do not come one after another, in a linear fashion. Instead, they can be classified according to the key conceptual opposition: identical/different. As such, they therefore make up systems of arbitrary representation and F. Héritier was the first to identify the underlying logic of these systems in different social spaces. As she explains,

with the same ‘universal symbolic alphabet’, rooted in this shared biological nature, each society devises singular cultural ‘phrases’ that are specific to them. ⁴

This approach points structural analysis in two complementary directions: the search for invariants and the composition of differences (which are inevitably similar!) within the same system of transformation. The abstract and the concrete are therefore closely intertwined because the progress of one can only be measured through the progress of the other. If it is true that, after Lévi-Strauss, we can no longer confuse the notions of ‘social

1 C. Lévi-Strauss, ‘The Structural Study of Myth’, in *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963) p. 231.

2 G. Holton, *The Scientific Imagination*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. ix, 10-11.]

3 R. Radcliffe-Brown, ‘On social structure’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 70, quoted by C. Lévi-Strauss, ‘The Structural Study of Myth’, in *Structural Anthropology*, *op. cit.*, p. 302 and following.

4 F. Héritier, *Masculin/Féminin. La pensée de la différence* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1996), p. 22.

structure' and 'social relations' as the latter 'consist of the raw materials out of which the models making up the social structure are built',⁵ then it logically follows that social relations already have a structure and we can only broach it by building models (the true object of structural analysis). However, this is precisely where F. Hérítier has brought about the most lasting progress in the discipline. By treating social facts as things, in Durkheim's wake, she identified the structuring nature within kinship relations of the differential valence of the sexes and the mechanics of 'bodily fluids'. This constant attention to structural phenomena has had remarkable consequences.

Circulation of fluids and kinship systems

First, by acting mutually upon each other, these two dimensions show that kinship choices are less about the necessity of exchange than about a concern with coherence in the circulation of fluids – within the body and between bodies – according to paths liable to ensure the construction of the social. Regarding the 'question of exchange', Françoise Hérítier's recent discussions of ethnographic data (from Arab marriage to the matrilineal system of the Na in China) have confirmed the levi-straussian configurations involved (in particular, the atom of kinship and the role of the maternal uncle). However, this aside, her major results lie in two areas of the structural theory of kinship: analysis of terminological systems and, thanks to the use of IT, analysis of semi-complex structures of alliance.

F. Hérítier 'substantialised' terminological systems, as it were, by cross-referencing them with the fluids and the three fundamental elements of any kinship system: 1. The fact that parents come before children; 2. The need for an encounter between the two sexes to allow reproduction; 3. The impossibility of reversing the natural order of births. Among other contributions, F. Hérítier showed that the combinatorics of these basic elements has a dual dimension: it is both historical (which gives them a certain flexibility) and timeless. This explains why it is useful not to try and identify all the combinations that have actually taken place but rather to understand why some of them – in kinship systems for example – remain only virtual. The comparison between terminological kinship systems confirms once again that structure already resides in things. Each system conveys a vision of the world, it tells us about relationships between sexes and generations and it does so through different combinations of the same basic biological elements.

F. Hérítier's analyses of the semi-complex structures of alliance among the Samo of Burkina Faso made a decisive contribution to our understanding of how elementary structures work (those in which spouses are prescribed). However, above all, they encouraged us to

⁵ C. Lévi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth', *op. cit.*, p. 279.

search for constants in complex structures (those where it is prohibited to marry individuals defined by their genealogical position). Today, we are in a position to make substantial progress in thinking about the modern Western marriage system, including in large towns and cities, by showing that there are regularities in spousal choices. Running counter to the current tendency to set aside the theoretical tenets of the discipline – with the intention of making progress, but often resulting in a return to a pre-structural position (particularly one that is empirical and inductive) – F. Héritier’s work on semi-complex structures of alliance have opened up long-lasting new perspectives in studies of kinship. This is evidenced, for example, by Philippe Descola’s work⁶ on the types of marriage found among the collective groups characteristic of the four ‘schemes of identification’ that he theorised in *Beyond Nature and Culture* for relationships between humans and non-humans: while animism and totemism lie incontrovertibly on the side of elementary structures, analogism and naturalism relate rather to semi-complex and complex structures respectively.

The differential valence of the sexes

Another key lever of F. Héritier’s anthropology is what she calls the ‘differential valence of the sexes’. This ties together the three founding pillars of Lévi-Strauss’s ‘social tripod’ – the prohibition of incest, the sexual division of labour and a recognised form of sexual union – and explains how they function. By positing the fact that sexual difference is at the foundation of all thinking, did Françoise Héritier uncover the ‘naturalist illusion’ that human societies use, more or less consciously, to try and legitimate masculine domination? The question is a sensitive one and the stakes are high insofar as the primal observation of the irreducible difference of the sexes could give the impression of a ‘unique and universal transcription, in a canonical form legitimating the relationship between the sexes, of facts that are considered as being of the natural order because they are the same for everyone’.⁷ From this perspective, the naturalist illusion is corroborated by systems of representation and their spontaneous nature is apparent in language – in popular notions of pregnancy and breastfeeding, but also in biologists’ conceptions which, still today, view life as the result of inert matter (the ovum) being fertilised by an ‘active’ principle (sperm). However, in reality, by exploring how the differential valence of the sexes is displayed in different human societies, it becomes clear that there is no ‘unique paradigm’ because, to use Françoise Héritier’s words again:

⁶ P. Descola, ‘Sur Lévi-Strauss, le structuralisme et l’anthropologie de la nature’, Interview with Marcel Hénaff, *Philosophie* (‘Claude Lévi-Strauss : langage, signes, symbolisme, nature’) n°98 (2008): 13.

⁷ F. Héritier, *Une pensée en mouvement*, ed. S. D’Onofrio (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2009), p. 91.

the characteristics observed in the natural world are broken down and atomised into conceptual units and then pieced together again in syntagmatic associations that vary according to the society in question.⁸

This point is illustrated by the way the Samo conceive of sperm production, as deriving from the thick, sticky red-coloured substance contained in bones.

Another methodological point should be made here. While this reflection about the differential valence of the sexes, the body and its humours encourages us to turn to the life sciences, it nonetheless still confirms how fruitful the discoveries of structural linguistics are. F. Hérítier's thought falls implicitly into the same line of thinking initiated by Joseph Bédier, who first discovered the existence of constants in the *Fabliaux* (a 'fixed, organic and unchanging' part). This line of thinking was taken up by the formalism of Vladimir Propp and, finally, by Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis of myths: the latter marked a decisive turn precisely when it began to break down the narratives of myths into irreducible minimal units (mythemes) and to recompose them using the resources of the musical score.

Through Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, the linguistic model permeated a large part of contemporary anthropological thought and was also at the origin of Françoise Hérítier's notion of the 'chain of associated concepts'. Strictly speaking, this idea derives both from breaking things down into minimal units as mentioned above (something we all owe to Troubetzkoy's notion of phoneme) and from the paradigmatic aspect to language (in particular the 'mnemonic group' brought to light by Ferdinand de Saussure,⁹ which resides in memory and can be activated at any time). It is because these chains of concepts intercommunicate by semantic contiguity (due to their paradigmatic association in the architecture of the mind) that they can be divided into segments, which then provide the primary matter that the anthropologist uses to build models. An illustrative example can be seen in the different ways in which the same elements are combined, worldwide, during New Year's celebrations.

However, F. Hérítier introduced an important methodological shift: she showed how the logic prevailing over how this invariant framework of thought functions makes it legitimate to compare groups that are not contiguous in space or in time (the Nuer and the Nambikwara, or Aristotle's Greeks and Sicilians). Given that the concepts forming these chains are associated with particular series of possibilities of use, the following assertion is possible:

when a given possibility in a given conceptual series is actualised, this either prevents other associations or allows them to arise. ¹⁰

In this sense, a prime example is afforded by linking Buddhist monks' combustion in their asceticism, in order to attain the state of the blessed, with the combustion of alcoholic

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 144-148.

¹⁰ F. Hérítier, *Une pensée en mouvement, op. cit.*, p. 76.

women in Europe and the United States in the 17th century: both relate to the same logic of the body consuming itself from the inside.

However, despite being rooted in the materiality of substances, symbolic logic does not lose the autonomy to which its universal nature testifies. The symbolic is very clearly one of the components making up the social fact. This is why it is so closely intertwined with the emergence and preservation of the incest prohibition. The differential valence of the sexes (and their identity) is structurally involved in the prohibition of two blood relations of the same sex sharing the same partner: this is the ‘incest of the second type’ uncovered by F. Hérítier.¹¹ By bringing the humours of the two blood relations directly into contact, their partner of the opposite sex transforms their nature-given consubstantiality, through an incestuous combining of the identical. By a logical reversal, this symbolic doubling of what is the same by what is other stands in correlation with the doubling of what is other in the self, and particularly to women creating male individuals.

The incest prohibition and symbolic transfer

The principle of equivalence between full siblings of the same sex ties in with the differential valence, as evidenced by the symbolic transfer of the prohibition of secondary incest in the most exemplary case: the ‘two-sisters prohibition’.

My point here is to underscore the importance of this symbolic transfer, which I have also emphasised in my own work on spiritual kinship.¹² More than prohibition itself, from a structural perspective, the relationship between one man and two sisters is mainly characterised by the fact that it is not neutral. When it is not simply rejected, combining the identical is either sought or subject to symbolic transfer, as evidenced by the American-Indian and European cases, as well as narratives from the Old Testament. F. Hérítier highlighted, in other cultural zones, both the specific nature of the prohibition related to sexual relations between a man and two sisters and the impossibility of a man marrying his sister-in-law after divorcing his wife or after her death. From her perspective, edifying confirmation of this secondary incest can be found not only in the social mores of faraway worlds but also in European, and particularly French, legislation, which prohibited such marriages until 1914

¹¹ F. Hérítier, *Two Sisters and their Mother: the Anthropology of Incest*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

¹² See S. D’Onofrio, *L’Esprit de la parenté. Europe et horizon chrétien*, preface by F. Hérítier (Paris: Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2004) and in particular the concepts of incest of the third type and the atom of spiritual kinship.

and in canonical law, which used to require an exemption for such marriages (this was abolished in 1986). 13

Another case – this time concerning combining the identical in the brother/brother pair – confirms the principle of equivalence between full siblings of the same sex and the possibility of transferring incest of the second type, while also paving the way for one of F. Héritier's more recent areas of inquiry, namely new reproductive technologies. The case in question is artificial insemination by a sperm donor. Contrary to the provisions of French law, which stipulate that donors should be entirely anonymous, sometimes couples bring along 'their' donor, whereas theoretically he is only supposed to make a donation to the sperm bank. In the official regulations, there is clearly something that, while framed in terms of anonymity, relates to a rejection of incest: the fear of the bodily fluids of two blood relatives meeting in the same woman. However, it is also important to understand why some people refuse the idea of an anonymous donor and put forward their own. An unknown donor can be perceived as the dangerous trope of the total stranger. As F. Héritier has noted:

There are no societies in which marriage with a total stranger is a predominant, valued trope. Such marriages remain exceptional, even though they often appear fundamental including in Arab societies where the most valued marriage is marriage of close kin.¹⁴

On the contrary, from the perspective of popular wisdom, the best donor to replace a husband is someone who could actually have been that husband and father. This model of 'home-made' artificial insemination is entirely coherent with incest of the second type: the fluids of the blood relative run no risk of meeting in the same womb because the husband's sperm is not supposed to have any active value. From a symbolic point of view, artificial insemination equates to taking the place of someone who is dead: the best donor is therefore a brother, first cousin or close friend of the husband, depending on the possibilities available. This logic connects these new technologies to more archaic solutions, for example in Southern Italy where, when a man was sterile, during certain pilgrimages a brother or friend would step into the breach in the shelter of a sanctuary. In a way, the two cases are very similar; on the one hand, the sacred outlook justified resolving problems of sterility in a collective orgiastic framework; on the other, centres for medically assisted reproduction establish an aseptic relationship removed from psychological involvement or physical intimacy. Whereas the normative institutional point of view distances us from the solutions devised in 'exotic' societies or in our own past, popular conceptions in fact draw us closer to these, through new modes of reproduction and new forms of parenthood (from blended families to civil unions). 15

13 However, the institutional point of view does seem to be overestimated here. At the level of popular beliefs, in several European regions a widower was almost obliged to marry one of his late wife's younger sisters, particularly if there were young children involved: *ibid.*

14 F. Héritier, *Une pensée en mouvement, op. cit.*, p. 196.

15 Cf. S. D'Onofrio, 'Babel und Bibel. Des nouvelles parentés déjà anciennes', in M. Gross, S. Mathieu, S. Nizard (eds.), *Sacrées familles. Changements familiaux, changements religieux* (Paris: ERES, 2011), p. 23-40.

The citizen anthropologist

Anthropology's vocation of 'composing worlds' also explains the quality of Françoise Héritier's political commitment. She views herself as a 'citizen anthropologist'.¹⁶ The notion of 'thought in movement', the title of one of her books, is very apt as it captures her ability to shift focus rapidly and surprise her interlocutors with her thought in action. The expression also reflects her ability to follow the movements of thought in order to understand how this thought is structured in things. It is therefore understandable that every time Françoise Héritier has become personally engaged in a societal cause – from violence to AIDS to the problems of research – she has viewed her political commitment through the lens of the discipline and made the cause in question an anthropological object. This allows her to approach these causes more efficiently, in both political and social terms, and reveals anthropology's true vocation, not just with regard to the other disciplines in the humanities but also in terms of its topics of analysis.

The true ethical dimension to anthropology consists precisely not in looking to ethnic groups to find systems of value that might provide new revelatory truths, but instead in drawing on the differential features of their cultures in order to go back to the founding principles of human identity. Like many of us, F. Héritier embarked on the intellectual adventure that is anthropology by chance, but she never left it. Her life and her life's work testify to her intellectual courage and generosity, which have created challenges that the new generation will no doubt take up.

Selective bibliography of Françoise Héritier's works

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¹⁶ According to one of the titles in the following collection of interviews: *Françoise Héritier. L'identique et le différent, entretiens avec Caroline Broué*, (Paris: Éditions de l'Aube, 2012).

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