ABSTRACT: The paper examines Lévi-Strauss’ criticisms of Sartre’s conception of dialectical reason and history as presented in the last chapter of *La Pensée Sauvage*, suggesting that these criticisms are misplaced. Sartre’s notion of reason and history in the *Critique* is much closer to structuralist accounts than Lévi-Strauss seems to recognize, but it differs in placing a strong emphasis on activity and praxis in place of the latter’s passive conception of reason. The active role of the inquirer in structuralist thought is examined using Roland Barthes’ account of “The Structuralist Activity,” which is shown to have important affinities with Sartre’s own conception of the relation of structure and praxis in the *Critique*. I then briefly consider a modified conception of the role of history in structuralism expressed by Lévi-Strauss in the mid-seventies, suggesting that his altered position still fails to recognize the important role of praxis in structuralist accounts of history. I conclude by suggesting that Lévi-Strauss’ criticisms are nonetheless important for illustrating the “Critical” character of Sartre’s *Critique*.

KEYWORDS: Sartre, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, structuralism, dialectic, praxis, history, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*

The last chapter of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *La Pensée Sauvage* contains his well-known criticisms of the conception of rationality operant in Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Lévi-Strauss faults Sartre for an overly strong conception of the difference between the “analytical” and “dialectical” functions of reason and for a perceived insistence on the primacy of the dialectical in his account of social ontology and history. This criticism illustrates Lévi-Strauss’ ongoing
focus on important structuralist insights into history, insights he seems to find threatened by the prominent role given to free human praxis in Sartre’s *Critique*. I want to suggest, however, that such a threat is overblown, and Lévi-Strauss’ criticism unfounded, when one fully considers Sartre’s nuanced account of the relation of analytical and dialectical reason. Analytical reason plays a much more prominent and active role in Sartre’s “dialectical nominalism” than Lévi-Strauss’ account would suggest, and Sartre’s own notion of reason and history comes much closer to that which Lévi-Strauss presents in purported opposition to it than the latter seems to have realized.

After a brief discussion of Lévi-Strauss’ objections, I introduce Sartre’s notion of the relation of analytic and dialectical reason by highlighting some of the complex concepts and themes in the *Critique* that go unnoticed (or at least unmentioned) in Lévi-Strauss’ criticisms. I then turn to Roland Barthes’ notion of “structuralism as activity,” which first appeared a few years after the *Critique*, to suggest that Sartre’s conception of the role of reason in the *Critique* might better be seen as compatible with and even supportive of structuralism, rather than antithetical to it, as Lévi-Strauss’ account highlighting analytical reason would suggest. Finally, I suggest that Lévi-Strauss’ structuralist objections, which he seems to have at least partially modified by the mid-seventies, are not fully justified even in their later form, and still betray the same basic misconception of the *Critique*. Lévi-Strauss’ later comments on Sartre’s *Critique* are nonetheless useful in highlighting the underappreciated tempered and “Critical” character of freedom in Sartre’s later work in contrast to the more radical notion of freedom characteristic of his earlier existentialist thought.1

For Lévi-Strauss, Sartre’s conception of the relation between dialectical reason and analytical reason vacillates between two basic positions. On the one hand, Sartre seems to posit a strong opposition, with dialectical reason functioning as the more “true” and primary analysis, and analytical reason as its merely superficial and erroneous counterpart. On the other hand, analytical and dialectical reason also appear in the *Critique* as “apparently complementary, different routes to the same truth.” 2 For Lévi-Strauss, analytical reason, as the bedrock of all forms of inquiry, must play the primary role in the formation of knowledge, and thus the first conception attributed to Sartre is more or less dismissed immediately. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss will assume that Sartre must also reject this possibility, since the *Critique* is in fact an analytical account of dialectical reason, and the
severing of analytical reason from truth would lead to a questioning of the possibility of truth for Sartre’s text itself. The relationship between dialectical and analytical reason, for both thinkers, cannot be a simple opposition of truth and falsity.

It is with Lévi-Strauss’ own discussion of the relationship between the two types of reason that strong differences emerge. In his formulation,

Dialectical reason is always constitutive: it is the bridge, forever extended and improved, which analytical reason throws out over an abyss; it is unable to see the further shore but it knows that it is there, even should it be constantly receding. The term dialectical reason thus covers the perpetual efforts analytical reason must take to reform itself if it aspires to account for language, society and thought; and the distinction between the two forms of reason in my view rests only on the temporary gap separating analytical reason from the understanding of life. Sartre calls analytical reason reason in repose; I call the same reason dialectical when it is roused to action, tensed by its efforts to transcend itself.3

For Levi-Strauss, analytical and dialectical reason are not directly opposed, and indeed are not even entirely distinct. Dialectical reason works upon the foundations of analytical reason, and is the aspect of analytical reason which might be called the movement of reason itself, its reaching out beyond its current boundaries to a progressively more encompassing comprehension of the functioning of the world. Dialectical reason is thus both a part of analytical reason and necessarily dependent upon it. Without the starting place of already grounded knowledge, vouchsafed by analytical reason, dialectical reason could not function in its “constitutive” role; it would have no resting place from which to be “roused to action” to provide further fodder for analytical, structuralist analysis.

Thus, what Lévi-Strauss opposes to Sartre’s dialectic of reason is a movement out from passivity, a seemingly self-generated activity of reason, through which it moves beyond (though does not efface) the static structures already discovered by analytical reason, further extending the reach of our conceptual structures and thus extending the reaches of our understanding. Throughout the last chapter of La Pensée Sauvage, Lévi-Strauss seems to conceive of reason as an organism in its own right, as a machine working independently, an account in which, if human beings appear at all, it is only as the grateful, passive recipients of the products of a self-sufficient reason: “the role of dialectical reason is to put the human sciences in possession of a reality which it alone can furnish them,” and it is only after the reception of these goods that the “properly scientific work” can begin.4 Lévi-Strauss rejects any opposition within reason, which
would necessitate a further explanation of the cause of opposed dialectical and analytical motivations, while he holds on to a strong conception of structuralism that would regard structures themselves as the principal (if not the sole) determinants of order and change in the world. His is seemingly a world of and constituted by structures, played out by human actors in diverse arenas of culture.

But the result of such a strong structuralist account is a strange picture of reality, history and knowledge: it suggests a world determined by a fixed, rational structure, in which all change and variation springs up from the supposedly invariant structure itself, in order to branch out further and thus extend the scope of reason. This branching out would then itself become a deadened, passive structure in turn, from which further “dialectical” activity would again seek to expand the network of rational knowledge, and so on. What is strange about this account from a Sartrean perspective is not its movement—the fits and starts of a reason that at times lurches forward and at times “ossifies” is indeed very similar to that presented in the Critique—but that, in Lévi-Strauss’ version, history has become little more than the life-story of reason-as-structure, in Klaus Hartmann’s apt formulation, “a non-human field in which to practice structuralist procedures.”5 To tell the story of the dialectic in this way is reduce it to a simplified progression of acorn and oak, without the mediation of soil, wind, and weather and the particularities pertaining to each moment and each growth. Likewise, Lévi-Strauss’ account of the Sartrean dialectic neglects Sartre’s complex account of freedom rooted in individual praxis.

Indeed, it is Sartre’s insistence on the role played by the free conscious individual in the making and making intelligible of history that Lévi-Strauss opposes. For him, Sartre’s analysis is simply the opposition of self and other writ large and “sociologized” as the opposition between one’s own society and that of others.6 In treating the social whole as if it had the immediate apodicticity of an individual consciousness, Sartre (on Lévi-Strauss’ reading) fails to recognize that he has moved beyond the possibility of establishing foundations for his anthropology.7 He is forced instead to commence his investigation of social reality on “secondary incidentals of life in society” which “cannot therefore serve to disclose its foundations.”8 This account of Sartre’s project in the Critique, if correct, would suggest his ascription to a social holism which takes social facts as real “things” which could themselves be taken as distinct, discrete units of social and even structural analysis.9 On such an account, Sartre becomes for Lévi-Strauss “the prisoner of his Cogito:
Descartes made it possible to attain universality, but conditionally on remaining psychological and individual; by sociologizing the Cogito, Sartre merely exchanges one prison for another. Each subject’s group and period now take the part of timeless consciousness.”

But Lévi-Strauss’ diagnosis of this abandoning of access to “foundations” betrays an incomplete grasp of the role of dialectic in the Critique. What he calls the “secondary incidentals” of society—the series, groups and collectives differentiated and examined in Sartre’s text—are insufficient for establishing the anthropological foundations of society only if we assume that the foundations sought are purely analytic and static; Sartre’s examples must fail to disclose the foundations of society only if we suppose his theory to be grounded on something different in kind from the praxis which illustrates it. But this is precisely the analytical presupposition that the Sartrean critique of dialectical reason rejects. Lévi-Strauss is tempted to align Sartre’s account with social holism because he fails to recognize the possibility of an anthropology that can take account of structure without thereby reducing the rational intelligibility of society entirely to it. For Lévi-Strauss, it is inconceivable to found anthropology on anything so “secondary” as human praxis, or anything so “incidental” as the lining up of serial individuals, each involved in their own projects, at the bus stop. These must of course be taken into account, but for the structuralist anthropologist they are always of secondary importance to the structural elements they reveal.

Thus, as Hartmann notes, “Lévi-Strauss applies his distinction of unconscious structure as opposed to conscious behavior to Sartre’s theory itself: what happens is that a philosopher’s theory, which is a conscious product, is imputed to its subject matter, the human agents, as if these could, like little philosophers, ‘live’ a theory and be conscious about their reason, while all they can do is enact a structure.” This way of looking at the Critique misses Sartre’s crucial identification of a theory of praxis with actual human activity: the fact that Sartre’s theory begins from (though, because of its dialectical movement, it cannot properly be said to rest upon) the conscious and free action of individuals, rather than the static structures of analytic rationality, is precisely the point.

One major merit of Sartre’s “dialectical nominalism” in the Critique is its ability to take account of important structuralist insights by opposing them, in the form of the “anti-praxis” of the practico-inert, to the free human praxis that accounts for change in history and dialectical movement in the world. Whereas Lévi-Strauss, beginning from the non-conscious, passive position of structure, critiques
Sartre for ascribing a fundamental role to human consciousness and thus “becoming the prisoner of his Cogito,” Sartre, beginning from the dialectician’s practical realization of our freedom in the world in the form of a praxis always occurring in the context of real relations between individuals, encounters structure along the way as the undeniable, quasi-active opposition of materiality and facticity in the form of the practico-inert. The *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is thus able to recognize the important role that structure plays in our world and in our history, without subsuming the possibility of free human praxis to an outright determinist and structuralist account that would reduce history to the playing out of a deterministic rationality, a history that would be, in effect, not really ours.

At the same time, Sartre’s recognition of the real relations between individuals, the analysis of which makes up the bulk of the *Critique*, also shows his distance from a purely atomistic sociology that would assert that all social relations are mere logical fictions derived from the single concrete reality of discrete individuals each engaged in his own free praxis. For Sartre, individual praxis is itself only possible alongside the mediation of the group:

> It is clear that the group… does not exist anywhere except everywhere, that is to say, it belongs to every individual praxis as an interiorized unity of multiplicity… But if we abandon every magical and mythical interpretation, then it is clear that this ubiquity does not mean in any way that a new reality is incarnated in every individual, like a Platonic Idea in individuated objects; on the contrary, it means that there is a practical determination of everyone by everyone, by all and by oneself from the point of view of a common praxis… the action is one as individual action, the objective is one, and the temporalization and the rule it gives itself are one; so everything is as it would be if a hyperorganism had temporalized and objectified itself in a practical end… ¹²

For Sartre, individual praxis always already contains the interiorized multiplicity of the group. This mediation is a precondition for the possibility of praxis as such. Thus, while there are no real social wholes and the force behind all dialectical change must ultimately be ascribed to individual praxes, the individual actors can be involved in praxis only insofar as they are already in a certain sense “united” in the group through a set of real relations. In Sartre’s dialectical nominalism, “the group never has and never can have the type of metaphysical existence which people try to give it. We repeat with Marxism: there are only men and the real relations between men… this certitude derives precisely from what we consider the reciprocal relation between the sociologist and his object….”¹³ The inclusion of relations precludes an exclusively atomistic understanding of
praxis, without reducing social functions to a set of structurally necessary groupings passively observed by the researcher. The action of individual praxis is individual and one, but it is neither the result of the discrete movement of an isolated individual outside of social relations nor the unified collective activity of the group as a holistic hyper-organism. Lévi-Strauss’ failure to recognize this important via media in Sartre’s dialectical materialism leads him to associate it with a brand of social holism, a position from which the fundamental role of individual human praxis, mediated by the group but not reducible to it, is lost.14

In contrast to the objections of Levi-Strauss, there is much in Sartre’s account that can support and even reinforce structuralist notions of history, especially in its way of theorizing structure within a dialectical account. This latter has the effect of emphasizing the way in which the structuralist enterprise, when fully grasped, must contain an ongoing element of human activity and can never be simply the static assertion of a foundation of rational concepts from which all further progress somehow arises. This human element, missing from the criticisms at the end of La Pensée Sauvage, is emphasized in Roland Barthes’ 1964 essay, “The Structuralist Activity,” a text which, while not mentioning Sartre, cites Lévi-Strauss throughout as a supreme exemplar of the experiential practice of “structural man” it advocates.15

Barthes notes that the terminology of structuralism—especially terms like structure, function, form, sign, and signification—has become stale: “They are, today, words of common usage, from which one asks (and obtains) whatever one wants, notably the camouflage of the old determinist schema of cause and product.”16 Against this stagnation, Barthes contends that structuralism involves not merely thinking about structures, but what he calls “a certain exercise of structure… a distinctive experience” undergone by “structural man, defined not by his ideas or his languages, but by his imagination—in other words by the way in which he mentally experiences structure.”17 Structuralism is thus for Barthes, at the most fundamental level, not a set of concepts or structures but an activity, an ongoing movement of mental operations, the goal of which is the reconstruction of a given object by the researcher in a way which exposes its “functions” through an examination of structures. But the purpose of such inquiry is not conceived, as it seemed to be for Levi-Strauss, as the simple extension of the realm of knowledge through the comprehension of an increasing number of “recon-
Barthes places structuralism—as activity—in a space between the original object of inquiry and the simulacra reconstructed from it. This position allows for the active discovery of a new intelligibility that is not reducible to the structures or objects of inquiry taken in isolation, but rather incorporates the active role of the inquirer as part of the resultant knowledge:

Between the two objects, or the two tenses, of structuralist activity, there occurs something new, and what is new is nothing less than the generally intelligible: the simulacrum is intellect added to object, and this addition has an anthropological value, in that it is man himself, his history, his situation, his freedom and the very resistance which nature offers to his mind.18

If we ignore the mention of structuralism, this account of the “generally intelligible” might be just as easily taken as a description of the Sartrean dialectic of praxis and exist, of the function of human praxis as an activity that determines and is at the same time partially determined by the practico-inert in the form of history, situation, and the “resistance which nature offers.” Barthes’ essay, published four years after Sartre’s Critique, points to the same recognition of the role of activity and dialectic in structuralism that is a central tenet in Sartre’s account of dialectical reason.

Two interrelated aspects of Barthes’ account are crucial with regard to the criticisms of Levi-Strauss: the notion of activity enacted upon the known object, and the emphasis on the human as performer of that activity. We should notice that in Barthes’ description, activity is taken to be directly related to, if not synonymous with, the act of reason by which “structural man takes the real, decomposes it, and then recomposes it.”19 But this decomposition and recomposition does not arise from the side of the object: it is enacted upon that object by something outside and differentiated from it. In Lévi-Strauss’ account of reason, the same moment was described as that in which dialectical reason functioned as “the bridge which analytical reason throws out over an abyss,” and this reaching out seemed to be the autonomous function of a predetermined rationality seeking—from the side the already-analytically determined object—to extend the boundaries of its knowledge, with no real account of the role of the inquirer in the process. For Barthes, structuralism is the free activity of an inquirer who reaches out to the previous boundaries of what was known analytically and discovers a new intelligibility in what lies between the already analytically known object and the object as the reconstituted “simulacra” of structuralist activity. His description of this moment thus reflects Sartre’s contention that the
ascription of real metaphysical status to relations as well as to individ-
uals arises directly from “the reciprocal relation between the sociolo-
gist and his object.”20 The difference between the original object
and the simulacrum is the “anthropomorphic value,” added to
the object from outside of the boundaries of analytic reason through free
human activity. It is precisely this role of human praxis that is con-
spicuously absent from Lévi-Strauss’ account.

Barthes clearly distinguishes two “typical operations” of struc-
turalist activity. First, one dissects the object “which is given to the
simulacrum activity,” and after this dissection, “once the units
[resulting from the dissection] are posited, structural man must dis-
cover in them or establish for them certain rules of association: this is
the activity of articulation.”21 It is the relation between these two
moments or “operations” of structuralism that is problematically
presented in Lévi-Strauss’ explanation of reason. In conceiving of the
activity of reason as a continuous bridging out of a single, analytical
reason toward the abyss of the unknown, Lévi-Strauss conflates the
analytical moment of dissection and the dialectical moment of articu-
lation. Because of this, he fails to take account of the role of the
inquirer in the newly articulated structural knowledge. It is true that
the fixed world of structures with which we are confronted, the his-
tory that we seek more fully to know, is, at the moment of knowing,
the domain of analytical reason. But for Barthes, as for Sartre, get-
ting there is no simple “reaching out” in further analysis: it necessar-
ily involves the free and intentional activity of “structural man,” a
moment of individual praxis which cannot originate within the
determined confines of analytical reason.

In short, Lévi-Strauss fails to recognize a distinct role for dialectical
reason because he does not adequately conceive the structuralist enter-
prise dialectically: his conception of reason as an outward-reaching col-
onization of the previously unknown into the kingdom of knowledge
treats the movement of totalization as a unilateral, one-step process—a
simple discovery of preexistent structures—instead of a bilateral, “pro-
gressive-regressive” dialectic wherein the moment in which structures
are discovered is also recognized to be a part of the same continuous
movement in which, through human activity, those structures have
been formed. In the “progressive-regressive method” employed in
Sartre’s Critique, by contrast, “by projecting ourselves toward our
possible so as to escape the contradictions of our existence, we unveil
them, and they are revealed in our very action although this action is
richer than they are and gives us access to a new social world in which
new contradictions will involve us in new conduct.”22
As a result of this oversight, Lévi-Strauss seems to conceive of the result of structuralist inquiry as the mere extension of the same type of knowledge arrived at through analytical reason. Dialectical reason is merely the constitutive aspect of a single, ultimately analytic reason. Without an active, dialectical conception of structuralism, Lévi-Strauss cannot recognize the different type of knowledge that is structuralism’s unique effect. In Barthes’ words, “the simulacrum… does not render the world as it has found it, and it is here that structuralism is important. First of all, it manifests a new category of the object, which is neither the real nor the rational, but the functional… Subsequently and especially, it highlights the strictly human process by which men give meaning to things.”

Lévi-Strauss’ opposition to Sartre’s account of the role of analytical reason manifests a concern for maintaining the active role of rational analysis in the formation of knowledge. Because analytical reason is conceived by Sartre as part of the “anti-praxis” of the practico-inert, Lévi-Strauss understands its position in the Critique to be secondary and negative. He is rightly concerned that, in emphasizing the role of praxis and human freedom, we risk obscuring the crucial structuralist insight into knowledge, that the very possibility of knowledge is always conditioned by previous knowledge and by history’s established structures of intelligibility, and that these structures are accessed and made intelligible only through analytical, rational inquiry into our current knowledge. Lévi-Strauss worries that this crucial aspect of analytical reason is lacking in Sartre’s account: “It does not follow from the fact that all knowledge of others is dialectical, that others are wholly dialectical in every respect. By making analytical reason an anti-comprehension, Sartre often comes to refuse it any reality as an integral part of the object of comprehension.”

At various points in the Critique, Sartre does seem to overly emphasize the freedom that his dialectical nominalism allows, and to downplay the role of the practico-inert in the formation of knowledge. In doing so, he also overestimates the distance of his conception of history from structuralist accounts. He seems at times to downplay one of the most powerful theoretical aspects of the Critique: its way of incorporating structuralist insights into the workings of history into an account of free human praxis. At times, in his zeal to emphasize this radical human freedom, he seems more like the existentialist Sartre of Being and Nothingness than the tempered dialectical theorist who, in Critical fashion, presents to us the limits of dialectical reason as praxis in the theory of the Critique.
But the “anti-praxis” to which free human activity is opposed in Sartre’s account is conceived specifically as a *practico*-inert, which is as necessary to Sartre’s dialectic as free praxis itself. To assume that its status as fixed structure relegates it to “anti-comprehension” is again to fall back upon the very bias in favor of a passive analytical reason that Sartre seeks to efface. Once we understand that comprehension must itself be conceived dialectically, we recognize that analytical reason, as part of the *practico*-inert, is a fully necessary and even, in a certain sense, *active* element in the ongoing dialectical movement of knowledge.

Because Lévi-Strauss’ conception of reason leaves out the role of the human actor in the formation of knowledge, he is unable to conceive comprehension as an activity in which every knower—even the most adamant structuralist researcher—is already an active participant. In criticizing Sartre for failing to recognize the *active* role of analytical reason, Lévi-Strauss is himself reinforcing a *passive* conception of intelligibility. Sartre foresees and addresses this very difficulty in the introduction to the *Critique*:

> The stance of the desituated experimenter... tends to perpetuate analytical Reason as the model of intelligibility; the scientist’s passivity in relation to the system will tend to reveal to him a passivity of the system in relation to himself. ...the dialectic as the living logic of action is invisible to a contemplative reason: it appears in the course of *praxis* as a necessary moment of it; in other words, it is created anew in each action. 26

Despite such foresight, the failure to fully comprehend the dialectical and thus active nature of knowledge is again the focus of Sartre’s comments in response to the criticisms presented in *La Pensée Sauvage*. He writes, “Lévi-Strauss does not know what dialectical thought is, he does not know it and he cannot know it... Dialectical thought is, above all, *in the same movement*, the examination of a reality insofar as it forms a part of everything, insofar as it negates this everything, [and] insofar as this everything comprises it, the condition and the negation...”27 Because he takes knowledge to be situated within the fixed confines of analytical reason, Lévi-Strauss does not conceive of the moment of knowledge as one of activity, of dialectical movement. Without incorporating the activity of the knower, he can only present a determinist structural conception of history in which knowledge is not made but only discovered in the unilateral outreach of analytical reason. Such an account does much to emphasize the role of structures in our knowledge, but it cannot adequately reflect the way they actively structure the possibilities of our *praxis*, or the way our partially undetermined free praxis *in the*
same movement is always affecting the formations and contours of the structures themselves.

However, Lévi-Strauss’ conception of the relation between history and structure does seem to have changed somewhat. In a 1974 discussion between Lévi-Strauss and the anthropologists Marc Augé and Maurice Godelier, Godelier questions Lévi-Strauss about the role played in history, in addition to structures, by “internal dynamics which play [qui jouent],” and notes that “no society exists without moving, utilizing and weighing upon its own structures.” He suggests that what is needed most of all is the development of a “theory of structural transformations,” and that accounts of societies as “real totalities” and of their “real history” must be conceived “not as a necessary sequence [extending] along a single line but as multiple sequences of passage, of the transfer of the location of functions [déplacement du lieu des fonctions] and thus of structural development [aménagement structural].”

Later in the discussion, Lévi-Strauss concedes the need for a stronger conception of the role of history to supplement structural anthropological analysis, and offers a more tempered account of the relation of history and structure, which seems to mirror Sartre’s notion of the progressive-regressive method as presented in Search for a Method and the Critique. He notes, “the linguists have taught us this. Every system—linguistic or otherwise—is in constant disequilibrium with itself, this is the motor of its internal dynamism… But, in addition to this, there are other things, which we can never reduce. History is there in front of us, as something absolute in front of which we must bow down.”

Interestingly, despite this admission of a role for history not reducible to structure, Lévi-Strauss does not fully echo the emphasis on movement and activity evident throughout Godelier’s remarks in the discussion. History is deemed something absolute, and we must bow down to it, but it is still presented as a monolith, as an opposed—but static—inertia. Here Lévi-Strauss has partially acknowledged Sartre’s dialectical insight, but he still ignores the active element of the inquirer in structuralism, as emphasized by Barthes, Godelier, and Sartre. Lévi-Strauss’ notion of history, even in more mature form, continues to be paralyzed by the very passivity inherent in determinist, structural notions of history that Sartre’s dialectical account is intended to diagnose.

Nonetheless, Lévi-Strauss’ continued opposition to Sartre’s notion of praxis does much to emphasize the important role of structures of necessity in any account of history or knowledge. It helps remind us,
in a way that Sartre himself rarely does in the text, that the *Critique* is intended to blaze a middle path. It can no more be an exuberant advocacy of a free and completely unlimited praxis than of an unyielding structural-historical determinism. It is rather a *Critique* of dialectical reason, in the sense inherited, albeit at much remove, from Kant: the problem Sartre seeks to address “is Critical.” 33 Sartre seeks not only to explain and promote a dialectical notion of history and anthropology, but also to examine the conditions of its possibility and its necessary boundaries: “on what conditions is the knowledge of a history possible? To what extent can the conditions brought to light be necessary? What is dialectical rationality, and what are its limits and foundation?” 34 In this sense, Sartre’s dialectic does not constitute the death of structuralist inquiry, but is in fact a conception of historical intelligibility that gives it new life by considering it an active form of inquiry undertaken in the realm of free praxis.

The early insights of structuralists like Lévi-Strauss are thus shown to be a crucial component of the examination of the activity of dialectical reason and its limits, and the importance of structures in the formation of knowledge are in fact reinforced—not forgotten—in Sartre’s reconceptualization of history. As Barthes had suggested, structuralism’s heyday may be buried in the past (and the recent death of Lévi-Strauss is perhaps the final nail in the coffin), but it represents an important activity of inquiry whose lessons remain:

Precisely because all thought about the historically intelligible is also a participation in that intelligibility, structural man is scarcely concerned to last; he knows that structuralism, too, is a certain form of the world, which will change with the world; and just as he experiences his validity (but not his truth) in his power to speak the old languages of the world in a new way, so he knows that it will suffice that a new language rise out of history, a new language which speaks him in his turn, for his task to be done. 35

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References


Notes

1. This paper does not deal with most of the important anthropological and sociological insights of the final chapter of *La Pensée Sauvage*, such as its criticism of Sartre for assuming a seemingly universal notion of history derived from Western European norms. For such a treatment, cf. Abel 1966. Lévi-Strauss’ criticism of Sartre also contains a strong argument in favor of taking account of synchronic alongside diachronic axes of analysis, a structuralist aspect of the conception of history largely missing from Sartre’s account. While this notion of a synchronic field of inquiry is closely related to Levi-Strauss’s conception of analytical reason, a full examination of it demands separate treatment.


5. Hartmann 1971, 43.


7. Here, and throughout this essay, “anthropology” is used in the broad sense of the French *anthropologie* or science of man, as it is used in throughout the original *Critique* and the Sheridan-Smith translation (Sartre 2004).
Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and the “Structuralist Activity” of Sartre’s Dialectical Reason

11. Hartmann 1971, 42.
22. Sartre 1968, 101; my emphasis.
23. Lévi-Strauss 1966, 246; emphasis in original.
27. Sartre 1972, 75-76; my emphasis.
29. Lévi-Strauss et al 1975, 183; my emphasis.
30. Lévi-Strauss et al 1975, 181; my emphasis.
31. Lévi-Strauss et al 1975, 180; my emphasis.
32. Lévi-Strauss et al 1975, 183; my emphasis.
34. Sartre 2004, 40; emphasis in original.