

LIVING IN AN OVERHEATED WORLD

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Rethink, 2009

On his 100th birthday in December 2008, Claude Lévi-Strauss was paid a visit by President Nicolas Sarkozy, France being a country where politicians can still build prestige by associating with intellectuals. In the press reports from the meeting, the centenarian, whose seminal book on kinship was published more than sixty years ago, said that he did not really count himself among the living any more. By saying this he referred, I believe, not just to his very advanced age and diminishing faculties, but also to the fact that the world he cherished was gone. Lévi-Strauss has devoted his life to the study of humanity under the most varying cultural circumstances imaginable, in order to develop his theory of human universals. Throughout his life – he was a cultural pessimist already in the 1930s – he has witnessed the accelerating disappearance of that world, that is the world of radical cultural difference.

Elaborating briefly on his own comment to Sarkozy, Lévi-Strauss added that the world was now too full. *Le monde est trop plein*. Presumably he meant that it was overfilled by humans and the products of their activities. At the time of his birth in 1908, the planet was inhabited by a grand total of 1.7 billion persons; global population now stands at 6.5 billion, and the proportion with their own Internet accounts and mobile telephones increases every year. No matter how one goes about measuring degrees of connectedness in the contemporary world, the only possible conclusion is that many more people today are much more connected than ever before in history. There are more of us, and each of us has, on average, more links to the outside world than our predecessors, through business travel, information, communication, migration, vacations, political engagement, trade, development assistance, exchange programmes and so on. The number of

transatlantic telephone lines has grown phenomenally in the last couple of decades; so has the number of Websites and international NGOs. Only a short while ago, nobody had heard of YouTube. Or Facebook. Or Twitter, to think of it. And one could easily go on and on. And on and on.

This is indeed a new world, one which in significant ways differs from all epochs that preceded it. Most of us now live under the bright light of the powerful headlights of modernity, as genuine contemporaries, aware, however dimly, of one another, divided by the same destiny.

This post-1991 world is, in addition to everything else, one of intensified tensions and frictions. One need only count the present number of transatlantic flights or the number of transpacific emails to realise that the webs of connectedness are hotter, faster and denser than in any previous period, with repercussions virtually everywhere. The spectacular growth of urban slums throughout the Third World is an indirect result of economic globalisation, just as the relative disconnectedness from the Internet in Africa – bracket South Africa, and there are more Austrians than Africans online – is a significant fact alongside the growth in text messages in China, from nil to eighteen billion a month in less than ten years. The networked capitalist world, in a word, is a framework, or scaffolding, for almost any serious inquiry into cultural and social dynamics.

This is an accelerated world, where everything from communication to warfare and industrial production takes place faster and more comprehensively than ever before. Speed, in physics, is just another way of talking about heat. In other words, when one says of someone that he or she is suffering from burnout, the metaphor is apt. The burnout is a direct consequence of too much speed. This, I believe, is a main reason why the notion of global warming has caught on in such a powerful way in the North Atlantic middle classes. The risk of global warming may be real, but that is not the point: By focusing on literal heat as an unintentional consequences of modernity, the narratives about global warming fit perfectly with, enrich and supplement, the other narratives about the contemporary age. It functions as

a natural-science corollary of stories about terrorism and imperialism. All these narratives, and their relations, depict the contemporary world as one "out of control", fraught with alienation, powerlessness, global forces and injustices brought about, and reproduced, by the rich and powerful – yet they are, without knowing it, digging their own grave. Above all, the notion of global warming feeds into an even more comprehensive story about acceleration.

Zones of tension are manifold in this world. In addition to the old and perhaps universal lines of conflict – power versus powerlessness, wealth versus poverty, autonomy versus dependence – new conflicts, frictions and tensions appear today:

- Globalisation versus alterglobalisation – the new social movements looking for viable, locally based alternatives to the TINA doctrine ('There Is No Alternative');
- Environmentalism versus development – a very real, if undercommunicated tension in countries like China and India, but also in the rich countries (my native oil-rich Norway being an excellent example);
- Cosmopolitanism versus identity politics (including xenophobia and religious fundamentalism) – a main dimension of politics almost everywhere in the world now, sometimes supplanting the left/right divide;
- Inclusion versus exclusion – walls, physical and metaphorical, preventing the free movement of people and their full inclusion in society;
- Uniformity versus diversity – shared templates of modernity articulating with local specificity; and finally
- Cultural autonomy versus the quest for recognition – finding the balance, as Lévi-Strauss once put it, between contact and isolation.

It is clear that the heightened speed with which encounters take place entails an unprecedented need for traffic regulations. Movement has to be restricted. Laws regulating immigration and citizenship are obvious examples, but so are attempts – in some countries – to keep the language free of contamination from foreign (often English) influence and purification attempts taking place in some religious groups, such as the Deobandi movement in Pakistan seeking to purge Pakistani Islam of Hindu elements.

There are common denominators to all the major crises of globalisation; the crisis of finance/the economy, the crisis of culture/identity, and the crisis of climate/the environment. They all signify a situation of heightened risk, they are fed by a pessimistic politics of fear, they reveal an extreme sense of vulnerability experienced by us, citizens of the world who are taken hostage to a whirlwind of global turmoil where even powerful governments are dwarfed and humiliated, and where citizen action easily takes on the appearance of something stubborn, defiant, David with a slingshot.

The mounting concerns over climate change fit perfectly into the dominant scripts for this world, a world run amok, a "world on fire" as Amy Chua entitles her passionate book on the plight of ethnic elites in the Third World. Images of literal forest fires – in Spain, California, Greece ... – have become a regular fixture on late summer news programmes, linking themselves easily to metaphoric fires in our minds; those of angered Muslim youth in European and Middle Eastern cities, overheated stockmarkets and the swiftness of the Internet. The recent swine flu hysteria – a way of keeping newspapers afloat during an otherwise eventless summer – fits this scene like a jigsaw piece. With the enthusiastic despair of someone who knows the game is up, we devour books with apocalyptic titles such as *The Revenge of Gaia* and even more alarming messages: it is probably too late anyway, there will be floods, hurricanes, desertification and epidemics; but even so, we have to act, and we have to do it now, and it's going to hurt really badly.

It is our duty to ask the heretical question amidst disquieting consensus: Could it not be the case that the experts are wrong this time as well? The

apocalyptic stories of climate change feed a trifle too readily into a preconditioned collective mind prepared for the worst. Accustomed to science fiction dystopias for more than a hundred years – H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* was published in 1904 – we have somehow rehearsed the story of climate change and the collapse of civilization as we know it for generations. And there is still a minority of climatologists who continue to argue that the main cause of current climatic instability is high solar spot activity. Non-specialists, that is to say the rest of us, can only trust their own intuitions and what they are told by the experts, when they make up their minds. Faced with expert systems of knowledge, trust is essential, but when experts disagree or are proven wrong, that trust begins to erode.

The pronouncements of experts depend on trust to be efficient, since there is no way most of us can assess their judgements. And we know only too well that experts are sometimes wrong. Financial experts have been unable to predict stock market crashes. The strategic experts of the FBI and the CIA were unable to prevent the terrorist attack on the USA in 2001. Experts on marine life disagree about the numbers of minke whales in the North Atlantic. Few if any experts on Eastern Europe were able to predict the rapid demise of Soviet-style communism, and nobody would have believed, in 1991, that Fidel Castro would still be in power in Cuba in 2009. Predictions about the spread of contagious diseases such as HIV-AIDS, Sars, Ebola and swine flu have varied wildly. In the case of Sars and Ebola, everybody was demonstrably way off the mark.

In the world of computers and fast information networks, even some of the major predictions have been proved wrong. In 1943, the IBM CEO Thomas Watson pronounced that there might be a world market for about five computers. In the early 1980s, when personal computers became common, pundits predicted the advent of the paperless office. A decade later, as advanced telecommunications made video conferences and telephone meetings possible and affordable, many predicted that this would reduce air travel. Finally, at the end of the twentieth century, there was global anxiety

around the so-called Y2K issue (the 'millennium bug'), and billions were spent in attempting to prevent disaster.

In the event, as everyone over 20 will recall, nothing dramatic happened to the world's computer driven systems as the century ground to a halt, although it was reported that some Australian bus ticket validation machines failed to operate after the turn of the millennium. The faith placed in the reality of the Y2K problem by governments, enterprises and individuals all over the world suggests that the belief in expert systems can sometimes be faith of the blind kind. Lacking criteria for evaluating the predictions, many simply invoked the precautionary principle: Since nobody knows what is going to happen, prepare for the worst.

So perhaps that is the best we can do, to act cautiously and prudently, fearful of dangers lurking beyond the nearest junction? Or perhaps not. What we need, if we are going to make a decent stab at what is left of the 21st century, is a positive vision rather than one fueled by fear and anxiety. I, for one, believe that it has to be green. The world is overheated in almost every conceivable way, and we need to cool down considerably while working on the new traffic rules for an irreducibly globalised humanity. But I must confess that I, for one, feel a lot more comfortable saying 'the environment' than 'climate change'.