

# Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2006), 351-370

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Originally: “La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines.” Lecture delivered 21 October 1966 at the International Colloquium on Critical Languages and the Sciences of Man, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore

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## 351

- Epigraph from Montaigne: “We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things”
- An “event” in the history of the concept of structure
  - An “event” is, however, precisely what structuralism is led to expect
  - This “event” is a “rupture” and a “redoubling”
- Concept of structure is as old as Western thought

## 352

- Until now, this structure has been reduced by having a “fixed origin”, a “point of presence”
- “The function of this center was [... to] limit what we might call the *play* of the structure”
  - “the center of a structure permits the play of its elements [only] inside the total form”
- “even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself”
- “At the center, the permutation or the transformation of elements (which may of course be structures enclosed within a structure) is forbidden”
  - “At least this permutation has always remained *interdicted* (and I am using this word deliberately)”
- “Thus it has always been thought that the center [...] escapes structurality”
  - “This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically,

*within* the structure and *outside* it”

- ““since the center does not belong to the totality [...] the totality *has its center elsewhere*”
- this “expresses the result of a desire” for “certitude”
  - “on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered”

### 353

- “This is why one perhaps could say that the movement of any archaeology, like that of any eschatology, is an accomplice of this reduction of the structurality of structure and always attempts to conceive of structure on the basis of a full presence which is beyond play.”
- “the entire history of the concept of structure, before the rupture of which we are speaking, must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center”
- “Successively, and in a regulated fashion, the center receives different forms or names”
  - “The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies”
    - “Its matrix [...] is the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word”
      - Capitalisation of “Being” as Heideggerian reference. History of metaphysics has seen the interaction of Being with world (*Dasein*) as rooted in the consciousness as centre
- “Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center [...] that it was not a fixed locus but a function”

### 354

- “This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when [...] everything became discourse”
- “The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely”
- “Events” which have spurred this thinking
  - Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics
  - Freudian critique of self-presence
  - Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics and onto-theology
- Circular relation between metaphysics and destruction of metaphysics
  - Cannot destroy language with language
    - Example: “the metaphysics of presence is shaken with the help of the concept of *sign*”

### 356

- Significance for human sciences
- Ethnology for example
  - “could have been born as a science only at that moment when a decentering had come about: at the moment when European culture [...] had been *dislocated*”

- but... ethnology is also a European science, no matter how much it critiques Eurocentrism
  - “it is primarily a European science employing traditional concepts”

### 356-357

- “It is a question of explicitly and systematically posing the problem of the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself. A problem of *economy* and *strategy*.”

### 357

- Levi Strauss on this problem
  - Traditional opposition of nature to everything else
  - Anything that transcends both is, in L-S's terminology, scandal
    - This is the incest prohibition

### 358

- “Levi-Strauss thus places himself at the point at which this difference, which has always been assumed to be self-evident, finds itself erased or questioned”
- “It could perhaps be that the whole of philosophical conceptualization, which is systematic with the nature/culture opposition, is designed to leave in the domain of the unthinkable the very thing that makes this conceptualization possible: the origin of the prohibition of incest”
- Erasure of nature/culture divide

### 359

- Levi-Strauss is content to use the objects within culture to critique it while attempting to demolish their very truth value
  - “Levi-Strauss will always remain faithful to this double intention: to preserve as an instrument something whose truth value he criticizes”

### 360

- Levi-Strauss's concept of Bricolage
  - Borrowing tools where one finds them
  - As opposed to engineer who constructs an entire lexicon
    - “In this sense the engineer is a myth”
    - “A subject who supposedly would be the absolute origin of his own discourse”
    - “The notion of an engineer who supposedly breaks with all forms of *bricolage* is therefore a theological idea”
  - “every discourse is bound by a certain *bricolage*”

### 361

- Levi-Strauss on myths is interesting
  - Has no center
  - 1.) Takes the Bororo myth as the “reference myth” and recognizes the arbitrariness of this selection – picked because of its “irregular position within the group”

### 362

- 2.) “There is no unity or absolute source of the myth”  
 “structural discourse on myths – *mythological* discourse – must itself be *mythomorphic*. It must have the form of that of which it speaks.”

### 363

- Problem of philosopheme and theorem vs. mytheme and mythopoem

### 363-364

- “Empiricism would be the genus of which these faults would always be the species”

### 364

- “On the one hand, structuralism justifiably claims to be the critique of empiricism. But at the same time there is not a single book or study by Levi-Strauss which is not proposed as an empirical essay”

### 365

- Totalization is not possible. Not because of empirical evidence, but because of play and the nature of language
- Levi-Strauss's “supplement”; Derrida gives this name to the new, replacing center

### 367

- Lacan-esque formulation: “The *overabundance* of the signifier, its *supplementary* character, is thus the result of a finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be *supplemented*.”
- Levi-Strauss treats history as a discourse of teleology

### 368

- History as a “detour between two presences”
- Structuralism relies on a single moment for its presence; it disregards history

### 369

- Says that Levi-Strauss has an “ethic of nostalgia for origins”

- This is the Rousseauistic side
- Flip side os Nietzschean
  - Joyous affirmation of the play of the world
  - *"determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of the center"*
  - Called *affirmation*

## 370

- Text descends into allusive metaphor
- Monstrosity of accepting this new mode
  - Messianic quality
    - Benjamin link
    - This function only fulfilled by the impending arrival of the Messiah, not necessarily by the final arrival itself

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