

On the lookout for catastrophe

Dimitri Robin

Primitive societies, Lévy-Bruhl explains, are on the lookout for signs of catastrophes, though they are unpredictable. Since we, too, are in a constant state of alert, this insight should inspire us.

Reviewed: Frédéric Keck, *Préparer l'imprévisible. Lévy-Bruhl et les sciences de la vigilance* (Preparing the Unpredictable: Lévy-Bruhl and the Science of Vigilance), Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2023, 286 p., 17 €, ISBN 9782130851523

Catastrophes and our inner primitive

While one can *expect* a catastrophe, it is much harder to *predict* one. Climate catastrophes or epidemics are expected, but one cannot predict their date, scale, duration, or consequences. This is why the West must break with the distinctly Western conception of nature as a set of phenomena that are *predictable, controllable, and knowable* to humans.¹

When it abandons its certainties about nature, the West must, by the same token, abandon its assumptions about reason. In doing so, it will return to a conception of nature and a "mentality" that is not--or is no longer--its own, but which belongs to what anthropologists of the last century called "primitive" society. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl

¹ On the Western conception of nature, see Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005, p. 302ff.

(1857-1939) maintained that the "primitive mentality" remains ignorant of causal connections, since all events are mystical in origin.² This mentality has no interest in predicting events: at best, it expects them, and remains *vigilant* to the signs that announce them. Vigilance is different from the "prudence" of the ancients in that it is not an intellectual virtue. The primitive mentality *interprets*, but it does not *calculate* (p. 130). The West (re)turns to this mentality when events defy reason's capacity for prediction. The twentieth century is full of events--or catastrophes--whose scale and horror were unpredictable. At best, one could only have been on the lookout for signs that prefigured them.

Interestingly, the French school of anthropology--from Émile Durkheim to Lévy-Bruhl, by way of Marcel Mauss and Robert Hertz--was contemporaneous with these catastrophes (the two world wars, the rise of anti-Semitism, and so on). By studying the life and work of Lévy-Bruhl, Frédéric Keck, in his new book, seeks to demonstrate that this contemporaneity was no accident: as he sees it, Lévy-Bruhl conceived of anthropology as a "science of vigilance" (p. 9)--that is, as a science that studies the ways in which primitive societies understand the unpredictable--and as a "vigilant science" (p. 9), which, by its own example, shows how to prepare for the unpredictable. Lévy-Bruhl's political action was consistent with his thought. In 1934, he participated in the foundation of the Comité de Vigilance des Intellectuels Antifascistes (the Vigilance Committee of Antifascist Intellectuals) and helped prepare the arrival of Jewish intellectuals who were forced into exile in the United States (p. 203).

In his book, which draws on family archives and conversations with Lévy-Bruhl's descendants--resulting in valuable information that allows for a better understanding of his work--Keck proposes a "genealogy of preparing for catastrophes" (p.221).

² "[S]ince it has not the most remote idea of such determinism, it remains indifferent to the relation of cause and effect, and attributes a mystic origin to every event which makes an impression on it." Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (New York/London: MacMillan/George Allen & Unwin, 1923), 43

Primitive Mentality Reborn: The Dreyfus Affair and the Great War

Keck rereads the entirety of Lévy-Bruhl's oeuvre, systematically seeking connections between historical events that he witnessed and the concepts he pioneered. His approach shows that the concepts of Lévy-Bruhl's anthropology do not simply describe a mentality that is different from ours: it is about "us," and his anthropology is best understood as *reflexive*.³

For Lévy-Bruhl, the primitive mentality does not, as we do, *represent* things. Rather, it posits *participatory* relationships between things that constitute their essence. If the Bororo people claim that they are parrots,⁴ it is not because they have a conceptual representation of the former that is distinct from the latter, but because they have mystically experienced a sense of participation between themselves and parrots. Keck demonstrates that Lévy-Bruhl's contemporaries were no strangers to this way of thinking, and that this fact may have inspired him. Are not political cartoons portraying Jean Jaurès and Alfred Dreyfus as birds based on psychological mechanisms similar to those by which the Bororo identified with parrots (p. 96ff)? Similarly, were socialist concerns about participating in government not based, like the primitive mentality, on the idea that participation defines essence (p. 94ff)?

Keck attributes particular importance to the Dreyfus Affair and the Great War. First, he wonders to what extent the opposition that Lévy-Bruhl posited between "primitive mentality" and "civilized mentality" originates with the Dreyfus Affair (p. 59), which pitted two radically different mindsets against one another: that of the Dreyfusards, inspired by a rational quest for truth, and that of the anti-Dreyfusards, which was indifferent to objective truth. Like the primitive mentality, the anti-Dreyfusard mindset was unconcerned with the principles of non-contradiction and causality. For instance, Alphonse Bertillon, who stubbornly sought to prove Dreyfus' guilt, "thought like a savage" (p. 76), since Dreyfus' guilt was a fact whose physical and logical impossibility mattered little to him.⁵ As for Dreyfus, he experienced the

³ Deprez proposes a similar interpretation in *Lévy-Bruhl et la rationalisation du monde*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010, p.91-92: "Part of the interest of Lévy-Bruhl's philosophy is to show that anthropology is first and foremost an awareness of our identity ... One could read him not as a theorist of the mentalities of so-called primitive societies ... but as an analyst of rationality who shows on what foundations it is based."

⁴ On this point, see Frédéric Keck, "Les hommes peuvent-ils 'être' des oiseaux ?," *Terrain*, published online October 21, 2020, DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/terrain.20696>.

contradiction between feeling and reason, that is, the two mentalities that Lévy-Bruhl theorized (p. 64ff).

Keck next seeks to demonstrate that the Great War led Lévy-Bruhl to develop a new conception of the primitive mentality. He no longer sought, as he had during the Dreyfus Affair and in *How Natives Think* (1910, trans. 1926), to describe a mentality that is indifferent to contradiction, but now defined it as steeped in a sense of unpredictability that it was prepared to deal with (p. 114). Keck maintains that it was the war and accidents (which are inherently unpredictable) caused by the war that led Lévy-Bruhl to alter his initial conception of the primitive mentality. This thesis led him to develop a highly original position. As Keck puts it, *The Primitive Mentality* (1922, trans. 1923) is a "reflection on the war, which made accidents more common and produced new collective representations that unified the social body" (p. 117).

The Dreyfus Affair and the Great War allowed Lévy-Bruhl's contemporaries to rediscover in themselves traces of the primitive mentality. By observing them, Keck argues, Lévy-Bruhl was able to forge his concepts.

On the connection between concepts and history

The attempt to explain the emergence of Lévy-Bruhl's concepts by the events of his time raises some difficulties.

First, the opposition between the Dreyfusard and anti-Dreyfusard mentalities, on one hand, and feeling and reason, on the other, most likely provided Lévy-Bruhl with an occasion for observing irreducible differences in ways of thinking or "mental functions." But is it fair to say that his anthropological account of the opposition between these terms "found its source" in these events (p. 59)? The explanation of this opposition or "great divide"⁶ had long preoccupied anthropologists and was even their primary concern well before the Dreyfus Affair broke out.

⁵ Alphonse Bertillon's attitude resembles that of the Indian who accuses Mr. Grubb of having stolen pumpkins from his garden, even though this was physically impossible (see Lévy-Bruhl, *Carnets*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998, p.6 sq.).

⁶ Sur le sens de ce concept, et ses avatars dans l'histoire de l'anthropologie, cf. Goody, *La raison graphique : la domestication de la pensée sauvage*, Paris, Minuit, 1979, ch. 1.

Similarly, there are reasons to be skeptical of Keck's assertion that the Dreyfus Affair "led ... Mauss to conceive of the transition from magic to science ... as a structural tension" (p. 76-77) and, more generally, that Hubert and Mauss' essays on sacrifice and magic are "reactions to the Dreyfus Affair" (p. 238, note 120). The political dimension and social utility of sacrifice are, moreover, relatively minor themes in their essay "Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function" (1899). They are mentioned only in the conclusion.⁷ Furthermore, "A General Theory of Magic" (1902) bears little resemblance to an occasional piece. Anthropology can explain current events, but current events cannot fully explain the emergence of anthropological concepts.

As for the First World War's impact on the reorientation of Lévy-Bruhl's conception of the primitive mentality, Keck appears to suggest that a primitive mentality steeped in a sense of unpredictability *replaces* a mentality that is indifferent to contradiction. Yet Lévy-Bruhl continued--even in his notebooks--to believe that the primitive mentality accommodated contradictions. If, moreover, these two conceptions are not exclusive and the sense of unpredictability can be seen as a consequence of indifference to contradiction, then the cause-effect relationship between the Great War and his revision of the concept of primitive mentality becomes debatable.

Watchdogs, whistleblowers, and vigilance

One of the originalities of Keck's work lies in its use of very contemporary concepts to grasp philosophy and anthropology from the last century. For Keck, Durkheim's theory of society prefigures recent debates on the principle of precaution; Bergson describes the idea of a whistleblower; and Lévy-Bruhl discusses the principle of a watchdog (p.11-12). Lévy-Bruhl's relevance can also be found in his writings on contagion (p. 144ff), which may be helpful for understanding the pandemic from which we have only just emerged.⁸

⁷ Fournier contends that Hubert and Mauss "ultimately refused to give their analysis [of sacrifice] an explicitly political character." *Marcel Mauss* (Paris: Fayard, 1994), p. 170/

⁸ See, too, Keck's other books on this topic: *Un monde grippé*, Paris, Flammarion, 2010; *Les Sentinelles des pandémies. Chasseurs de virus et observateurs d'oiseaux aux frontières de la Chine*, Bruxelles, Zones sensibles, 2020; *Signaux d'alerte. Contagion virale, justice sociale, crises environnementales*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 2020.

Keck's book thus seeks to "show the contemporary relevance of the political thought of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl" (p. 8). Yet what is contemporary and relevant about an anthropologist who was, if not pro-colonial, at least very "paternalistic" (p. 169)?

Keck explains that Lévy-Bruhl's trip to the Philippines in 1920 altered his theory of the transition from the prelogical to the logical mentality (p. 158). The latter is neither more evolved nor superior to the former: they are radically different. This difference was embraced by colonial subjects in independence movements, which Lévy-Bruhl encouraged--to the point that his work could be interpreted, notably by Paul Nizan, as a "harsh critique of colonization." If the history of anthropology has not endorsed this view, it is because, even in his examination of societies like the Philippines, Lévy-Bruhl adopted an ethnocentric and paternalistic perspective. For example, in a series of lectures given in Beijing, he defended "the need to bring the principles of the European Enlightenment and French rationalism" to the Asian world (p. 164).

Lévy-Bruhl's discourse on the colonies was in perfect harmony with that of Jaurès (p. 152). Lévy-Bruhl's affinity for socialism, and particularly Jaurès, is a key theme of Keck's book. The "genealogy of preparing for catastrophes" is based on "French socialism and its manifestations in the social sciences" (p. 221). For Keck, this represents an alternative narrative of the genealogy of preparation to neoliberalism's essentially individualistic narrative. In this way, Keck seeks to *renew socialism*, as embraced by Jaurès and Lévy-Bruhl, which supported Dreyfus and, despite its faults and prejudices, emancipation.

Keck's book provides powerful answers to contemporary questions. Like Lévy-Bruhl's thesis *L'idée de responsabilité* (The Idea of Responsibility, 1884), it is best read as a "contribution to public debate" (p. 33), and not simply as a history of ideas. How does one prepare for catastrophe? Thanks to a full-fledged politics of vigilance--such is the definition of "socialism" to which the book leads. Due to their roles in the Dreyfus Affair, Keck describes Jaurès as a "whistleblower" (p. 69), and Dreyfus--like all those who fight for justice, emancipation, and truth--as a "watchdog." Watchdogs hear alarm signals before others; they stand at the boundary between the future and the present, to the injustice of which they are subject. The social ideal can only be perceived and anticipated by those in whom the mentality theorized by social science—science, therefore, of vigilance—has not been completely extinguished.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, March 26th, 2024. Translated by Michael Behrent with the support of Cairn.info, published in booksandideas.net, January 8th, 2026.