

June 18, 2007

CONNECTIONS

## Postmodern Thoughts, Illuminated by the Practices of a Premodern Tribe

By [EDWARD ROTHSTEIN](#)

News of the death of the philosopher Richard Rorty on June 8 came as I was reading about a small Brazilian tribe that the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss studied in the 1930s. A strange accident, a haphazard juxtaposition — but for a moment this pragmatist philosopher and a fading tribal culture glanced against each other, revealing something unusual about the contemporary scene.

Mr. Rorty was one of America's foremost philosophers, who in midcareer, after devoting himself to the rigors of analytic philosophy, decided that "it is impossible to step outside our skins — the traditions, linguistic and other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism." He argued that we are always dealing with multiple and conflicting claims of truth, none of which can be conclusively established. We choose what to believe based on what is useful for us to believe. For Mr. Rorty, the importance of democracy is that it creates a liberal society in which rival truth claims can compete and accommodate each other. His pragmatism was postmodern, tolerant to a fault, its moral and progressive conclusions never appealing to a higher authority.

But the Caduveo of Brazil would not have welcomed that kind of all-inclusive embrace, and probably that embrace would not have been so readily offered to them. When Mr. Lévi-Strauss wrote about this dwindling tribe in "Tristes Tropiques," his fascinating 1955 memoir, he compared these "knightly Indians" with their "aristocratic arrogance" to a deck of European playing cards; they even looked the parts of jacks, kings and queens, he wrote, with their cloaks and tunics decorated in red and black with recurrent motifs resembling hearts, diamonds, spades and clubs. The tribal queens, Mr. Lévi-Strauss noted, even seemed to trump Lewis Carroll's imagined Queen of Hearts with their taste for playing with severed heads brought back by warriors.

The Caduveo, in Mr. Lévi-Strauss's description, would never have considered for a moment that their beliefs and their society were arbitrarily constructed. The Caduveo had all the presumption and self-importance of royalty. They tattooed their bodies with elaborate "asymmetric arabesques" that served as coats of arms and signs of status. Their leaders removed every bit of facial hair, including eyelashes, and sneered at hairy Europeans. They even intimidated their Spanish and Portuguese conquerors.

They were, then, preliberal, premodern. In their midst every principle Mr. Rorty valued was violated. They provided their own transcendent authority and demanded its universal recognition. A neighboring, related tribe essentially became their serfs, cultivating land and turning over produce.

The Caduveo founding myth recounts that, lacking other gifts at the moment of creation, the tribe was given the divine right to exploit and dominate others. Mr. Lévi-Strauss once suggested that the Indian tribes of the Americas were like peoples of the Middle Ages, lacking the example of Rome; but the Caduveo, in his

descriptions, are more like nobility from the 17th to mid-18th century, lacking the example of either the American or French revolutions.

But there was also something else about this tribe that drew Mr. Lévi-Strauss's attention: "It was a society remarkably adverse to feelings that we consider as being natural." Its members disliked having children. Abortion and infanticide were so common that the only way the tribe itself could continue was by adoption, and adoption — more properly called abduction — was traditionally implemented through warfare. The tribal disdain for nature extended into its active denigration of hair, agriculture, childbirth and even, perhaps, representational art.

In all of this the tribe was proclaiming that while its dominance derived from nature and was beyond question, its superiority meant that nature had no further claim on it. Everything else was created by the tribe itself, particularly the ornate and elaborate tattoos and paintings on members' bodies. In this respect the tribe was not countercultural but counternatural. It refused to defer to external forces or commands.

In Mr. Lévi-Strauss's telling the Caduveo actually take on a strangely postmodern flavor, shedding the very idea of natural law or constraints. Even Mr. Rorty might have found his sympathies touched. He once suggested that science had been established by modern man "to fill the place once held by God" but that it didn't merit that position; it should be seen, Mr. Rorty said, as having the "same footing" as literature or art, and he suggested that physics and ethics were just differing methods of "trying to cope." The Caduveo might have agreed, as long as they were permitted to determine which methods of coping were used.

But what place would such a society have in a Rortian democratic landscape? How would they be answered if their claims to divine right and arbitrary power came in direct conflict with the more embracing arbitrariness of Mr. Rorty's vision?

In reasoning one's way into pragmatism, in minimizing the importance of natural constraints and in dismissing the notion of some larger truth, the tendency is to assume that as different as we all are, we are at least prepared to accommodate ourselves to one another. But this is not something the Caduveo would necessarily have gone along with. Mr. Rorty's outline of what he called "the utopian possibilities of the future" doesn't leave much room for the kind of threat the Caduveo might pose, let alone other threats, still active in the world.

One tendency of pragmatism might be to so focus on the ways in which one's own worldview is flawed that trauma is more readily attributed to internal failure than to external challenges. In one of his last interviews Mr. Rorty recalled the events of 9/11: "When I heard the news about the twin towers, my first thought was: 'Oh, God. Bush will use this the way [Hitler](#) used the Reichstag fire.' "

If that really was his first thought, it reflects a certain amount of reluctance to comprehend forces lying beyond the boundaries of his familiar world, an inability fully to imagine what confrontations over truth might look like, possibly even a resistance to stepping outside of one's skin or mental habits.

But in this too the Caduveo example may be suggestive. As Mr. Lévi-Strauss points out, neighboring Brazilian tribes were as hierarchical as the Caduveo but lacked the tribe's sweeping "fanaticism" in rejecting the natural world. They reached differing forms of accommodation with their surroundings. The Caduveo, refusing even

to procreate, didn't have a chance. They survive now as sedentary farmers. Such a fate of denatured inconsequence may eventually be shared by absolutist postmodernism. The Caduveo's ideas weren't useful, perhaps. Some weren't even true.

*Connections, a critic's perspective on arts and ideas, appears every other Monday.*

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---