

*Structure: Human  
Reality and  
Methodological  
Concept<sup>1</sup>*

Lucien Goldmann  
Ecole Pratique  
des Hautes Etudes  
and Institut de Sociologie,  
Université de Bruxelles

First of all I would like to add a few things that I had left out of the text because they seemed so obvious.<sup>2</sup> I have tried to define the method of genetic structuralism using examples that could be easily understood: a cat hunting a mouse, two men lifting a table that would be too heavy for one man alone. These are events and it is a question of structure, but I am not saying that the behavior of these men or of this mouse, as such, constitutes a structure and that if the behavior were slightly changed we would have another structure. The problem of structure is also a problem of levels.

I have defined structure, as reality and as a concept of research, as originating from real behavior, but I must add that it originates from the solution of practical problems encountered by living beings. Man has a limited consciousness, a limited number of categories that can be combined in a limited number of ways, so that, facing hundreds of thousands of concrete situations, he is forced to create structures as patterns of behavior [*comportements*] which he retains for a long time to solve a whole series of similar problems, although he must adapt the structures a little each time and renounce the possibility of an ideal solution.

Between the two extremes of individual problems concerning particular events and the most general categories of the human mind—which are purely formal and do not

<sup>1</sup>“La Structure: Réalité humaine et concept méthodologique.” The text which follows is a translation and, in some instances, a paraphrase of the tape-recording of M. Goldmann’s lecture. The footnotes have been supplied by the translation.

<sup>2</sup>The reference is to a supporting essay (in French), distributed at the Symposium, which is printed as an appendix to this volume.

permit one to understand the difference say between a play of Racine and the *Iliad*—are situated all structures and structuralist analysis. It is impossible to situate them more precisely between these two extremes for two reasons. The first is that the transformation of a structure and the number of events that it can include depend on concrete situations: there are cases where social groups and individuals must change their mental structures very quickly in order to adapt to new situations. Next, on the level of research, it depends on the formulation of the problem and the type of solution that is sought. If I am studying the Jansenist group or the social context of a Pascal or Racine, I must—and this is the fundamental problem of all research—look for the group and circumscribe (*découper*) my object so that it can only be associated with a group which could solve a certain number of important practical problems with—and only with—a given set of mental structures, which, applied to the solution of imaginary problems, have resulted in the theater of Racine.

If I want to confront a much vaster problem such as foreign policy in the seventeenth century, I might have categories and structural patterns (*structuration*) which might include terms such as France or Holland or, inversely, at a much more limited level one might study segments of groups where a number of major structures would be involved. The *découpage* of the physicist's enterprise is different from the chemist's—the latter stops at molecules whereas the former goes all the way to atoms and particles. The important point is the thesis that structures are born from events and from the everyday behavior of individuals and that, except for the most formal characteristics, there is no permanence in these structures. If we want to study a human phenomenon we must circumscribe the object in a certain way and try to determine the essential questions: Who is the subject? In whose life and practical activities (*praxis*) did the mental structures and categories and the forms of thought and affectivity arise which determined the origin and behavior of the object studied? At the level of the event there is neither sociology nor structuralism; for example, if we look at a play by Racine simply as a localized event it is impossible to explain and understand it. Inversely, if we go to the level of the most general structures it is history and transformation that disappear—and this is what is happening today in one current of structuralism.<sup>3</sup> It is in this perspective that you must understand the two examples which I have taken as a point of departure.

<sup>3</sup>For a further methodological discussion, see M. Goldmann's essay "Le Structuralisme génétique en histoire de la littérature," *MLN*, 79, 3 (1964): 225-39.

The fundamental thesis of all genetic structuralist sociology is that all human behavior, and more generally the behavior of any living being of some complexity, is significant [*a un caractère significatif*]. That is, it is a question of a subject who, within a certain situation, will change this situation in a way that is favorable to his needs and, on the human level, to his affective needs and concepts. In very general terms, there is a disequilibrium and the behavior is significant to the degree that it tends to re-establish an equilibrium. In man significant behavior is of course always accompanied by consciousness which introduces a complexity that must be taken into account in speaking of literature and culture. However it isn't always necessary to suppose consciousness. For example, a cat hunting a mouse behaves in a way that we can translate, when we study it, into a problem. The problem is how to find food and catching the mouse is the solution to this problem. Of course neither problem nor solution exists for the cat, but we can study the analogy between this behavior and cultural or social behavior. There are significant structures on this level: the behavior of the cat is not merely a sum of elements but a real structural pattern. The cat adapts itself; if there is an obstacle it will go to the left and then come back to the right. There is a structure of behavior and a physiological organization [*montage*] created in order for the cat to adapt to the situations that it faces. There is no consciousness here. Structure is essentially defined by the necessity to fulfill a function in a certain situation. History is constituted by the fact that, in the changing situation created by the action of the subject and by exterior interventions, structures, which have been developed as being rational and having a chance to fulfill their function to allow a group or an individual to live in conditions that existed previously, are no longer rational, and must be modified to fulfill their function. To forget—as a whole school of sociology has done—that, since all human reality is made up of overlapping structures, every structure fulfills a function within a larger structure and that a structure is defined as rational only by its ability to solve a practical problem, incurs the risk of denying history and assuming that everything takes place within one particular structure. It is this dialectic of function and structure, which I will call significance [*signification*], that separates the two structuralist schools. It is within this dialectic that we find the separation of signifier and signified which, of course, is important only on the human level.

Here I would like to add a second, particularly important, distinction. Since psychoanalysis has familiarized us with the concept of the

unconscious, we too often, in speaking of the psychical, see only the conscious and the unconscious. However, for our analysis it is essential to distinguish a third category. I think it is best to leave to the word unconscious its psychoanalytical meaning which supposes a repression of things that are not accepted by consciousness. In addition to the conscious and the unconscious, there is a domain which is very important in our research and which can be called the implicit or the non-conscious. This is obvious, for instance, where I talk of my physiology: I am not conscious of the physiological basis which determines the way I walk or run, but it is not unconscious. I have not repressed it and if a physiologist explains it to me, I will understand it and it will become conscious. The same situation exists on the psychical level; for example, I am not conscious of the structure of formal logic. We must strictly separate the repressed unconscious, the implicit non-conscious and the conscious.

I would now like to approach the extremely important problematic of the subject. When I say the cat catches a mouse, there is no problem: the cat is the subject of this behavior. However at the level where there is language and symbolic systems the situation is completely changed. A new element appears which makes it necessary to distinguish two different types of structures. This new element, which is made possible by communication, is the division of labor. Were one to take the subject in the very strict sense as the agent of the action, if this table is too heavy to be lifted by one person and if two people, say John and James, lift it, it is neither John nor James who lifts the table: it is John-and-James. This is very important, because when it becomes a question of transforming society, of modifying a whole combination of interior or exterior givens, there are no longer any individual subjects. Symbolic communication takes place between two configurations, which must be distinguished. In the case of moving the table, between John and James lifting the table communication takes place *within the subject*; it is intrasubjective. If there were another person who didn't want John and James to remove the table, he would be the subject of another action, and they would speak as one subject to another. There is the intersubjective on the level of the individual and on the level of groups; and there is the intrasubjective which is communication between individuals who are together the subject of the same action, and that is something quite different. Biological or libidinal behavior is transformed by communication; there is, for example, the interiorization of the other. But, however modified, there remains a domain of behavior in which, if one links consciousness and

symbolization to *praxis*, the subject remains an individual, intersubjective but individual. But with the division of labor, with a production that is related to a whole series of different behaviors, the situation is very different. Can we distinguish between the two types of subjects? In the first case we have an individual subject—intersubjective if you wish—for whom the other can be only an object—of love, of repulsion, of indifference, etc.—but not a subject. In the second case, what we have is a transindividual subject, in which the subject is made up of several individuals—transindividual signifying that the subject is always a group. I propose the hypothesis that individual subjects—or individual consciousnesses—by acting within behavior patterns which in turn go through the division of labor—become transindividual. It is the group that is in charge of satisfying the need to appease hunger or to provide shelter and, at the other extreme of the scale, of building the Empire State building. All activities connected with technology, civilization, or culture depend on the group.

It is very important to add that in reality things are not separate. Taking our simple example again, let us say that there are six people lifting a table. It could happen that two of the six have complexes that will interfere with the action of moving the table or, inversely, individual intersubjective actions might be favorable to the moving of the table. The important point is that, in order to conduct a scientific study, I must first make distinctions. It is impossible to make an analysis of or to establish a dialectic from a mixture. Of course even at the transindividual level two groups which are opposed in one context might be united in another. Imagine for instance a conflict between workers and businessmen in a country which suddenly finds itself at war. A new solidarity between the two groups might arise. The overlapping is permanent and all individual consciousnesses are mixtures. However, the historian or the sociologist must always separate first the larger group from the individual and then the various sub-groups within the larger unit. If I am studying Jansenism, relating it to the *noblesse de robe*, I know very well that each individual Jansenist belongs to numerous other groups; but what interests me, in analyzing the Jansenist group, is whether what they have in common, in comparison to what separates them, will allow me to understand certain patterns of behavior which result precisely from the fact that they are together. What we have here is the conceptual necessity to divide our object of study and such a division is indispensable if our work is to be scientific.

Another very important problematic which I should like to take up

is that of the relationships between Freudian psychoanalytic interpretation and genetic structuralist sociological explanation. Here the importance of the concept of the subject becomes obvious. First, is the question of the subject purely a conceptual game, a matter of ideological sympathy? No, the question is essential from a scientific standpoint. In relationship to what does the object that I propose to study—the theater of Racine or the French Revolution—become comprehensible and intelligible? I should also like to ask what may sound like a naïve question, but think about it and try to take it seriously. Why should it be inconceivable that Racine could write a play which might express his individual, unconscious, and biographical problems while using a formal pattern (*schema*) which does not manifest an unresolvable contradiction, where there might be a predominance or a preference for reasons as in the great Cornelian dramas? I don't think that at an individual level you could say this to be impossible. But if the mental categories, the fundamental structures of Racine's tragedies, stem from a concrete historical situation such as that of the French parliamentarians, who were dissatisfied with the monarchy's centralist politics but who could not oppose the monarchy because they were dependent on it, one can hardly conceive of Racine taking a positive position or displaying Cornelian *générosité* at a time when his group was in a fundamentally unsatisfactory position in society.

The structural configuration of research is much different in the case of collective creation from that in dream analysis, where interpretation and explanation are inseparable. There are many common elements in psychoanalysis and genetic structuralism: the affirmation that all human behavior has a meaning; that to understand this meaning one must refer to a larger context—to the biography of the individual in one case or to history in the other—which goes beyond the level of the manifest. But there is a fundamental difference in that it is impossible in Freudian psychoanalysis to separate interpretation from explanation. That is, in interpreting a dream one must at the same time have recourse to the psychological category of the unconscious and to the whole totality in which the dream is inserted. I should like here to make a parenthesis. The two most important intellectual procedures in the scientific study of human facts are comprehension and explanation. Both are purely conceptual procedures in spite of the fact that comprehension is often thought of as being related to identification, empathy, sympathy, etc. Comprehension is the rigorous description of a significant structure in its relation to a function. Explanation is the comprehensive description of a larger structure in which the struc-

ture being studied has a function. For example, if I describe Jansenist mentality, thought, theology, I understand Jansenism; I am making an effort of comprehension; I am not explaining anything. But in understanding Jansenism I explain how the works of Racine and Pascal originated in Jansenism. I describe the relationships of the classes in seventeenth-century France; I am again in the process of describing a structure and making it comprehensible; but I am also explaining how Jansenism was born. Explanation is the insertion of the structure that we have described and understood into a larger structure in which it has its function and where I can understand the nature of its unity.

Let us note then that it is impossible to understand a dream or any phenomenon connected with the individual subject without explanation. Freud links interpretation to the unconscious, that is, psychological categories are necessary for interpretation. This may be because all forms of behavior of the individual subject originate in structures where consciousness enters only as an auxiliary element and has no autonomous structure.

In sociology the situation is very different. Here consciousness tends to create autonomous structures, structures that can be written, understood, and interpreted in themselves. I need sociology to see how they originated, but, for example, once I understand the genetic origin of French tragedy in the seventeenth century, I can explain the life of *Phèdre* without adding anything to or taking anything away from the text, which, by the way, gives us a quantitative criterion by which to judge an interpretation. An interpretation can be considered satisfactory only if it takes into account a high enough fraction of the text to be the only possible one—if one for instance is satisfied with accounting for only 60 per cent of the text, then there are at least six or seven interpretations.

I would say that all phenomena of consciousness are situated on a line with two extremities and that by understanding the two extremities we can understand what goes on between them. At one end we have the transindividual behavior of the group in which the individual subject's behavior produces no distortion—the individual either having sufficiently repressed his personal needs and drives or being remarkably well adapted. In this case the text can be interpreted autonomously, without explanation or recourse to symbolism. There is no need to extricate the subject in order to determine the mental structure which has created it, but it is there and it has its meaning. For example, in *Britannicus*, Narcissus is killed; Julie retires to the vestal virgins; Nero cannot enter. "Absolutely improbable!" the critics cried immediately.

One doesn't enter the vestal virgins at eighteen years of age, and Nero entered the temple whenever he wanted to. Of course, but that is not the point. Within the mental structures of the Jansenist group, to which Racine belonged, the King, the temporal power, does not enter the temple. This doesn't mean that the temple in the play symbolizes the Christian Church or heaven. It does mean that the mental categories of the tragedy originated in a certain group of *noblesse de robe* and were formulated more precisely by the Jansenist group from which Racine came. Great cultural works are those which can be interpreted without adding anything—and where the interpretation takes into account 80 or 90 per cent of the text, that is to say, the only reading possible. Inversely, at the other end of the line, individual, libidinal problems intervene so forcefully that they completely deform social logic; for example in the case of dreams. Although dreams have a meaning, it cannot be communicated or autonomously interpreted at the explicit level of the dream. It is by explaining it that one interprets it, and even then one cannot interpret a dream without having recourse to the symbolic order, the unconscious and other similar categories. Between these two extremes, the great cultural creation and the dream or neurosis, are situated the enormous majority of individual consciousnesses and behavior, which are mixtures and mixtures cannot be analyzed. Social reality is always a mixture. Any historian will tell us that pure capitalism or pure feudalism are nowhere to be found. But these essential instrumental concepts are based on the structure of reality and allow us to understand the mixture.

Roland Barthes's talk is entitled "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" I believe he was right to raise the question but only at the individual level. As he once said, the writer writes for the sake of writing and as such he is different from the man of action who speaks or writes in order to act upon society. But if the question of writing is raised within the context of the logical structures of a collective subject, then the question as to whether "to write" is an intransitive verb is eliminated, for the problem of writing for its own sake is now raised in relationship to the collective subject of social life. Did Racine's works act upon society? For there is a division of labor and the problematic of literary history, like that of history, is to situate all human behavior in a framework within which it becomes necessary and comprehensible. And I remind you that this is only possible at the level of a transindividual subject. An analysis that remains on the personal level is equivalent, for instance, to the assertion that the workers that built The Johns Hopkins University worked only for their salary. This cannot



be derived. They were not interested in Hopkins. Yet through a division of labor and the elimination from consciousness of certain factors this University, a society, and social concepts have been constructed, and these workers have participated in this construction. The Cartesian ego, the theory of autonomous thought, the psychology of intransitive writing cannot be understood unless we situate them within a structure through which we can comprehend them and see them as one part of a collective subject which must be related to all the rest.

I would like now to pose a series of methods—logical problems. First, there exist two distinct levels of form. Beyond the pure form spoken of by the linguist or the semiologist, there is what could be called the form of content. Some might call this content, but it *is* form; it is the significant structure of the universe created by the writer. In both *Théophile* and *Faust* we are told the story of a man who has sold his soul to the devil. In *Théophile* such an act should lead to hell, and it is only through the intervention of the Virgin that the man gets to heaven. Whereas in *Faust* this very same act is the only way to heaven—as the fact that Marguerite gets to heaven after Faust clearly shows. The difference between the two is essential and makes for distinct structures. For another concrete example of this problem, consider the two plays: *Haute Surveillance* and *Les Bonnes*, both by Genêt. In each case we have two groups of individuals composed of a superior who is absent and two subordinate characters, one of whom kills the other at the end which leads to a new configuration symmetrical with the first—i.e., two new groups are formed one absent the other present. However there are also differences between these two plays. The characters are women in one case and men in the other. In *Les Bonnes* by killing one of the subordinate partners the maids arrive at a triumph, an apotheosis, while *Haute Surveillance* ends with a defeat. The universe of *Les Bonnes*, which does not exist in *Haute Surveillance*, can be exactly defined by the opposition between the dominated and the dominating, the impossibility of killing the dominating, and therefore the necessity—which did not exist in the other play—for the ritual murder of the absent mistress within an imaginary dimension (*dans l'imaginaire*).

It is the semantic material that we have analyzed, not the linguistic form of the message. The problem is whether one can analyze the structure of form, within a narrow linguistic or stylistic context, before knowing what the pure linguistic forms served to express, or what universe the writer wanted to convey. Personally, I have never

been able to do it, even though it should be theoretically possible. But from the perspective in which I am working I can point to a few cases where problems that stylists had encountered in working with certain formal structures have become clear once the form—meaning, as I indicated, form of content or form of a particular universe—was extricated. My first example will be taken from Pascal and will deal with the nature of the fragment and the structure of “the wager”; my second will deal with a line from Racine’s *Phèdre* which a whole series of French critics have considered either devoid of content or independent of the content of the play: “*la fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë*” [*the daughter of Minos and of Pasiphaë*]. You are familiar with all that was written about the “true outline” of the *Pensées*, until a structuralist analyst showed not only that the fragment as a literary form was necessary to Pascal but that—and this is far more important—he used it intentionally and that it was a Cartesian perspective that had prevented considering fragments as ends in themselves. For Pascal’s message is that Man is great in that he searches for absolute values but small in that, without ever ceasing to search, he knows that he can never approach these values. The only form to express this content is, of course, one which does not prove the contrary: which doesn’t show either a man who has abandoned the search or one who has approached the goal. The fragment is such a form. Let us not forget that in Jansenist literature there is a great deal of discussion about the relationship between content and form. What hasn’t been written about the dialogue of the wager and the question as to who is the partner? There is supposed to be a partner who is a libertine, because it is said that Pascal couldn’t bet with himself. Yet the text tells us that he does, for Pascal’s faith is a wager that is a total commitment to God, with the permanent possibility of its not being kept—an uncertain certitude. The text itself must then show both aspects of total commitment and of the refusal of such a commitment by him who bets in the void. We can see why the form in which Pascal cast his “wager” is a necessary one and perfectly adapted to its content.<sup>4</sup>

Now let us briefly turn to Racine’s line “*la fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë*” which has been considered by some to be pure sonority. In a sociological study of Racine I defined *Phèdre* as a being who does not seek her values in a world which is based on separation and compromise; *Phèdre* demands both extremes: Venus and the Sun, love

<sup>4</sup>For an extended discussion of “Le Pari de Pascal,” see *Le Dieu caché* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), pp. 315–37.

and glory, values which cannot be reconciled in Racine's universe. At this point the line "*la fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë*" suddenly becomes much clearer in its relationship to the play. Minos and Pasiphaë are opposites: not only is Pasiphaë in heaven and Minos in hell, but Minos is a judge in hell and Pasiphaë a sinner in heaven. These oppositions in turn correspond to the contrasting sonorities which characterize the composition of the verse. These examples were rather sketchy. I mentioned them only because I wanted to show that there was a possibility of bringing together abstract linguistic or stylistic forms with what I have chosen to call the form of content.

What I briefly tried to show in this analysis is that our research deals with intrasubjective structures with transindividual subjects. If I am asked, not why Racine's tragedies could be written from Port Royal but why it was Racine who wrote them, that is a problem for the psychoanalyst. Among twenty-five or fifty Jansenists it was Racine who found in this world-view the possibility of expressing his personal problems in a coherent manner. Another who might have arranged them a little less coherently would not have created a masterpiece. But the essential fact is that if I want to understand the meaning of Phèdre or of Genêt's plays, I must refer them not to the individual Racine or Genêt but to the social groups who worked out the structures with which the plays (which have no symbolic meaning) have created a rigorously coherent universe, the same structures which on the practical level facilitated the group's possibility for living. Therefore the important thing is to know with which *collective subject* one is dealing. To transfer problems with an individual subject to a collective social context—and vice versa—is absurd and dangerous even if the separation between the individual and the collective is clear only to the analyst.

I have already mentioned what I consider to be a fundamental contemporary problem: Can studies of the linguistic type be extended to the totality of signifieds, the thought or the universe that a work is intended to express? I doubt it very much. Valid and exciting as these studies may be in their own domain, my example related to the two plays of Genêt ought to show how they methodologically eliminate both the basic content and the subject. If from an infinite possibility of choices people choose only one particular structural configuration it is because of the need to express certain things and, inversely, what is expressed depends on the fact that it must be expressed in language. However, it should be obvious that the two are not identical. If applied

to the meaning or content of a work, linguistic studies will surely fail to grasp the form of meaning.

Furthermore, I believe that any study which attempts to explain the literary work by an individual subject will always encounter at least two fundamental difficulties. Most often it will be able to deal only with a limited number of elements of the work, namely those in which the writer has expressed his individual problems, perhaps in a symbolized form, but the structural configuration of the universe of a literary work is transindividual and it is this unity which will be missed. Even admitting that such an analysis might succeed, in an exceptional case, it will never be able to explain the difference between a masterpiece and the work of a lunatic which has an analogous individual function. Aesthetic value belongs to the social order; it is related to a transindividual logic.

It is equally beside the point in the field of aesthetic sociology to do what nine-tenths of sociologists continue to do: to attempt to relate the content of a work with the content of the collective consciousness. It can be done. There is no writer who has not put in his work something of what he has seen or lived through, but the more mediocre a writer is, the less he has invented. This is why sociology has such extraordinary success with mediocre novels. On the level of structure, the content of a work can be treated neither as symbolizing something else nor as a sociological category. There are no sociological elements in a literary work; there are only imaginary individual characters and situations. There is no Jansenist theology or morality in *Phèdre*; there are only Phèdre, Hippolyte, and Bérénice. However, the structural configuration, the world view, the mental categories, good and evil, the absolute, marriage, etc., and the relationships which link them all together and make for the unity of the play were worked out on the social level.

Finally, even the most orthodox structuralist sociology is threatened by the danger of reductionism. It is of little interest if I say that Racine is a representative of the *noblesse de robe*. He is much more. Great literary works, such as those of Racine, originate from a certain social situation but, far from being the simple reflection of a collective consciousness, they are a particularly unified and coherent expression of the tendencies and aspirations of a given group. They express what the individual members of the group felt and thought without being conscious of it or without being able to formulate it so coherently. They are a meeting of the personal and the collective on the highest level of

significant structuring. Their function is analogous to that of thought and action: to organize social structures so that life becomes more acceptable.

*Discussion*

ALBERT COOK: I think that the causal connection between John and James around the table is very simple, but the literary work transforms these meanings, even social meanings. Even if you account for Racine's work through genetic structures and even if your analysis maintains a perfect coherence between the individual and society, in any case, your question implies your answer. There are other questions as well, questions which, in fact, you have raised. For example, the question of Pascal. I am in perfect agreement that for Pascal the necessity of the fragment is clear. This question is independent of the social origins of Pascal's thought. Also your categories of closure and opening on Minos and Pasiphaë, with which I believe I am equally in agreement, are independent of your social analyses. What, then, is the necessity of sociology for such an analysis?

GOLDMANN: First allow me to make my thought a little more explicit. There is no causal connection between John and James. What there is, more exactly, is a common subject, a subject which is in the process of moving the table. Starting from there, if I want to understand what John is thinking and what James is thinking, there is a subject. There is no *we*; *we* is a pronoun which means *I* and *you*. In any case the relationship is not a causal one. This much is to specify and to eliminate a preliminary misunderstanding. But take the example of the daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë. Of course, I said myself, if I know that what is expressed in the work is a universe in which man must re-unite two opposite values or in which he must always search for absolute truths which he cannot find, then I don't need sociology. It remains to be seen, first of all, how I could have known this. For there is an enormous literature on both Racine and Pascal which has not known this. I don't believe there has been any coherent interpretation of Pascal. Now in order to know this, I would have had to ask myself first of all where the social group that thinks in a certain way is: it is in the *noblesse de robe* and in the Jansenist group that I found it. It is only within this group that this vision of the world came into being. It was a social group which, in translating its way of feeling and of thinking, worked out a theology and a morality, and then a genius arrived who gave it