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The cities of Claude Lévi-Strauss

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Abstract

The influence of Brazil and its Indigenous peoples in the trajectory of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss is well known. However, less attention has been paid to how cities and urban phenomena appear in his theoretical framework. This article revisits a range of works and materials by systematically recovering and organising some Lévi-Strauss' observations on cities. The aim is to speculate what a lineage of urban studies inspired by Lévi-Strauss might have been and may still become. The intention is to develop a research program for a certain anthropology of cities. An anthropology that would follow the intuitions of his structuralist program, revisiting and updating its foundations, drawing inspiration from the potential of his morphological analyses and ecological critiques, taking cities as laboratories of the human mind. Proposing the idea of a "wild city", this work suggests that renewed engagement with Lévi-Strauss' reflections on urban life offers valuable tools for addressing contemporary challenges in urban environments. In doing so, this contribution seeks to expand the intellectual landscape of one of the twentieth century's most influential thinkers, to understand what his urban itineraries and reflections might still teach us about the world and about anthropology.

Keywords

Claude Lévi-Strauss · City · Anthropological Theory · Architecture · Ecology

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Introduction

The sensibility and imaginary of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss were profoundly inspired by Brazil and its Indigenous peoples. What is often overlooked, however, is the significant presence of cities and urban phenomena in the anthropologist's thought. As he himself emphasises, for instance, in his contact with Brazil, "there is also a dimension that is not always given attention and that was decisive for me: that of the urban phenomenon" (Lévi-Strauss, 2011b: 43).

Despite not constituting the central focus of his work, Lévi-Strauss repeatedly expressed his interest in cities throughout his career. Notably, before beginning his fieldwork among the Indigenous peoples in expeditions that took him deep into Brazil, he claimed that his work in ethnology began in the city of São Paulo (Lévi-Strauss; Eribon, 1988). Between 1935 and 1937, this city was home to the anthropologist and became a laboratory for Lévi-Strauss and his students (Peixoto, 2004), a site for intellectual and methodological experimentation throughout his tenure at the recently founded *University of São Paulo* (USP).

Beyond São Paulo, other great metropolises shape the landscapes of Lévi-Strauss' urban imaginary. To name just a few, there is Paris, the French capital, where Lévi-Strauss spent his entire childhood and youth and where he established his career; New York[1], in the United States, where he took refuge during the hardships of the Second World War, immersed himself in countless ethnographic works in its libraries and met Roman Jakobson, an important figure for the development of structuralism; Calcutta, in Inde; Lahore and Karachi, in Pakistan, where he conducted a brief fieldwork in 1950; Tokyo, in Japan, a childhood fascination that he finally visited, between 1977 and 1988, in the maturity of his career as an anthropologist.

Although this paper does not delve into the details of Lévi-Strauss' experiences and observations in each of these places[2], it is worth highlighting that, overall, his impressions

[1] About Lévi-Strauss' and New York, see Debaene (2010); Loyer (2024).
[2] For a concise analysis of certain aspects of Lévi-Strauss' experiences in these places, see Mongin (2011).

of urban life can be categorised into four broad groups. First, there is the weariness of death imprinted on the cities of the Old World. Second, the effervescence and provisional nature of cities in the New World, still in the throes of their formation. Third, the miseries of what he called the "ultimate expression" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955) of the urban condition in Pakistani and Indian cities. Finally, Tokyo and other Japanese cities emerge as glimmers of hope for the anthropologist, who perceives and perhaps idealises in them a more harmonious relationship between human beings and the environment.

It is interesting to note, however, that discussing cities through the lens of Lévi-Strauss' trajectory and thought is akin to performing a "bricolage" operation. In other words, it is an almost archaeological effort to piece together a series of scattered reflections on the urban. This process notes Vincent Debaene (2008: 1708), "it is not only a matter of performing one of those groupings that 'enrich the aesthetic feeling' [...] it is above all a matter of playing the game of this 'science of the concrete' at work in the *pensée sauvage*, which orders the world by articulating the sensible properties of natural elements". As Lévi-Strauss describes:

> Now, the specific feature of mythical thought, as of bricolage on the plane of practice, is to develop structured sets, not directly out of other structured sets, but from the residues and debris of events: "odds and ends," as English puts it, or, in French, *bribes* et *morceaux*, fossilized witnesses to the history of an individual or a society (Lévi-Strauss, 1962: 32).

This is precisely how cities appear throughout Lévi-Strauss' career: as "residues", "debris of events", and "fossilized witnesses". These traces, assembled like in a kaleidoscope (Lévi-Strauss, 1962), are "[...] then left free to arrange themselves along the pages, according to arrangements commanded by the way they think of me [Lévi-Strauss], much more than determined [by him] consciously and deliberately" (Lévi-Strauss, 1983: 327-328). In this sense, we come to realise that much like the myths orchestrated by the anthropologist in *Mythologiques*, while Lévi-Strauss thinks about cities, in a way, cities also think about themselves in Lévi-Strauss.

The profound engagement of the anthropologist with large metropolises around the world, being himself a "native" of this urban world, is a significant factor. As the Italian anthropologist Massimo Canevacci (2004) points out, it is precisely this proximity that enables both the city and the anthropologist to think through one another. This dynamic exchange, combined with Lévi-Strauss' keen perception, opens unexpected avenues of thought, reshaping and reinvigorating discussions relevant to our contemporary world, such as an enhanced sensibility to the emergence of climate and ecological issues (Keck, 2011; 2013), notably.

As emphasised, cities appear throughout Lévi-Strauss' career as residues and fragments. Except for *Saudades de São Paulo* (1996), the only book by Lévi-Strauss entirely dedicated to a city, the anthropologist's reflections on urban spaces and phenomena remain scattered, primarily concentrated in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) and *Saudades do Brasil* (1994). Beyond these works, his observations can be found in various articles, such as "Réponses à des enquêtes – Civilisation urbaine et santé mentale", published in *Anthropologie structurale deux* (1973); "New York post- and préfiguratif", initially written in 1977 for the exhibition catalogue Paris–New York at the *Centre Georges Pompidou*, later republished in *Le Regard Éloigné* (1983); and "Message à la ville et au peuple de Tokyo pour l'année 1988", featured in the magazine *Tokyokin* (1988)[3]. His insights also appear in interviews, including *De près et de loin* (1988) with French philosopher Didier Eribon, and *Loin du Brésil* (2011b), a conversation with journalist Véronique Mortaigne published in *Le Monde*. However, as historian Emmanuelle Loyer (2015) emphasises in her meticulous biography of Lévi-Strauss, his engagement with urban spaces, through his wanderings and experiments, had been a constant presence since his youth.

This article revisits these and other materials by systematically recovering and organising some Lévi-Strauss' observations on cities and urban phenomena. The aim is to speculate: what a lineage of urban studies inspired by Lévi-Strauss might have been and may still become. The intention is to develop a research program for a certain anthro-

[3] NAF 28150 (73). Articles 10 (1988-1996). BnF.

pology of cities (Silva, 2023; 2024) that draws from the potential of Lévi-Strauss' insights and his way of doing anthropology. To this end, the article unfolds into four parts. The first section revisits some of the debates and elements presented in the courses that Lévi-Strauss taught at the University of São Paulo;, where the city was approached as a "laboratory". This section also refines the interpretations of his urban reflections, which have been explored by a few authors. The second part explores how a combined reading of *Tristes Tropiques (1955), Saudades do Brasil (1994), and Saudades de São Paulo (1996)* offers a compelling path for analysing cities and other modes of inhabiting the world within a Lévi-Straussian framework. The third section examines the "invention" of Lévi-Strauss as an "anthropologist of cities" and demonstrates how his enduring interest in cities and urban forms aligns with his structuralist project. Finally, the fourth section proposes a reading of *La pensée sauvage (1962)* as a way of speculating on the idea of a "wild city", suggesting that renewed engagement with Lévi-Strauss' reflections on urban life offers valuable tools for addressing contemporary challenges in urban environments. In doing so, this contribution seeks to expand the intellectual landscape of one of the twentieth century's most influential thinkers, as well as to understand what his urban itineraries and reflections might still teach us about the world and anthropology.

Unveiling a landscape

Brazilian anthropologist José Guilherme Cantor Magnani (1999: 98) perceptively observes that Claude Lévi-Strauss' reflections on cities did not "[...] establish a more systematic line of inquiry on the subject". Still, he highlights, it is intriguing to consider that "had circumstances been different, he might have initiated a fruitful lineage of urban studies". Nevertheless, even Magnani, in his reading of the cities in *Tristes Tropiques*, seems to limit Lévi-Strauss' urban experiences to his initial impressions upon arriving in Brazil, his observations about São Paulo, his critiques of Goiânia, or the places where he spent his time

> to contemplate the effects of urbanisation in the interior of São Paulo, to outline some of the rules underlying the process of establishing new cities in the north of Paraná and finally, on the other side of the world, to draw comparisons with cities, markets, human types and crowds in India and Pakistan (Magnani, 1999: 98).

To name just a few, a deeper exploration of the landscapes traced by Lévi-Strauss in his work reveals intricate details: traces of the vegetation in the city of Fort-de-France, Martinique; the experience of crossing the streets of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, "over large stones placed at regular intervals like pedestrian crossings" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 31); a brief stroll through the upper city of Salvador, Brazil; the recognition of San Juan, Puerto Rico, as his first point of contact with the United States; the contemplation of Fire Island's shifting dunes in New York or "[...] the sublimity of the skyscraper and the shaded valleys in which the many-coloured motor-cars lie strewn like flowers" (ibid.: 87); and even an encounter with scribes in the hills of the Chittagong district, near Lahore, Pakistan.

Despite its significance, Magnani's brief analysis remains somewhat constrained, as it neither fully delves into the breadth of Lévi-Strauss' observations on cities nor explores his collection of photographs of São Paulo (Lévi-Strauss, 1996). The article's fragmented approach contributes to the broader landscape of unsystematic reflections on Lévi-Strauss' urban insights, without advancing a more systematic line of inquiry.

When analysing Lévi-Strauss' reflections on cities, particularly in *Tristes Tropiques*, it would be reductive to assume they were merely the product of his so-called "Sunday-anthropologizing" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955), as the French anthropologist Michel Agier reiterates, albeit in a limited manner:

> 'Human thing par excellence', the city is the "most complex and refined form of civilisation", wrote Lévi-Strauss, but it also seemed to him to be the place of extreme individualisation and a blurring of social boundaries, reaching the point of unimaginable chaos. A multitude without a totality, the city would be too heterogeneous for the ethnologist to be able to access its complexity without getting lost... even though it is also for him, a Westerner who carries out his fieldwork in "exotic" places, the place where he keeps his private life, his resting place. At best, the city could be – in the ironic words that Lévi-Strauss used for his own comments on São Paulo, where he lived from 1935 to 1939 – the place for a "Sunday-anthropologizing' (Agier, 2011).

A more detailed reading of *Tristes Tropiques* reveals that Lévi-Strauss' interest in cities runs deeper than it may initially appear, and that there is no irony in his remarks about his observations of São Paulo. While it is true, as Agier (2011) notes, that São Paulo served as "the place where he keeps his private life", Lévi-Strauss' engagement with the city extended well beyond this. As Lévi-Strauss himself acknowledges, his ethnological work, before taking shape among Indigenous peoples in Brazil, began in and around the city of São Paulo (Lévi-Strauss & Eribon, 1988). This crucial fact seems to have eluded many authors examining Lévi-Strauss' formative years in Brazil, as they often narrow their focus to his expeditions among Indigenous groups and his "exotic" experiences.

> Instead of returning to France, my wife and I went to the Mato Grosso among the Caduveo and Bororo tribes. But I had already begun work on ethnographic projects with my students: on the city of São Paulo itself and on the folklore of the surrounding areas, which particularly engaged my wife's attention (Lévi-Strauss, 1988: 20-21).

As anthropologist Fernanda Arêas Peixoto (2004: 89) emphasises: "The city of São Paulo offers newcomer material for observation and reflection. It also provides the teacher and their students with a laboratory for sociological experimentation, which they incorporate

into their daily work". According to Lévi-Strauss, "at that time, one of the great privileges in Brazil was being able to witness, in an almost experimental manner, the formation of that fantastic human phenomenon that is a city" (Lévi-Strauss, 2011b: 43). In this sense, "cities, São Paulo in particular, constituted a primary research framework" (Peixoto, 2004: 90) for Lévi-Strauss. In the introduction to his book *Saudades de São Paulo* (1996), the anthropologist underscores the significance of cities in his lectures:

> Those of my students who glance at these lines may remember how important the city was in my teaching. As practical assignments, I would give them the street where they lived, the market or the nearest crossroads, and they would observe and describe the repetition in space of housing types, social and economic categories, professional activities, etc (Lévi-Strauss, 1996:14).

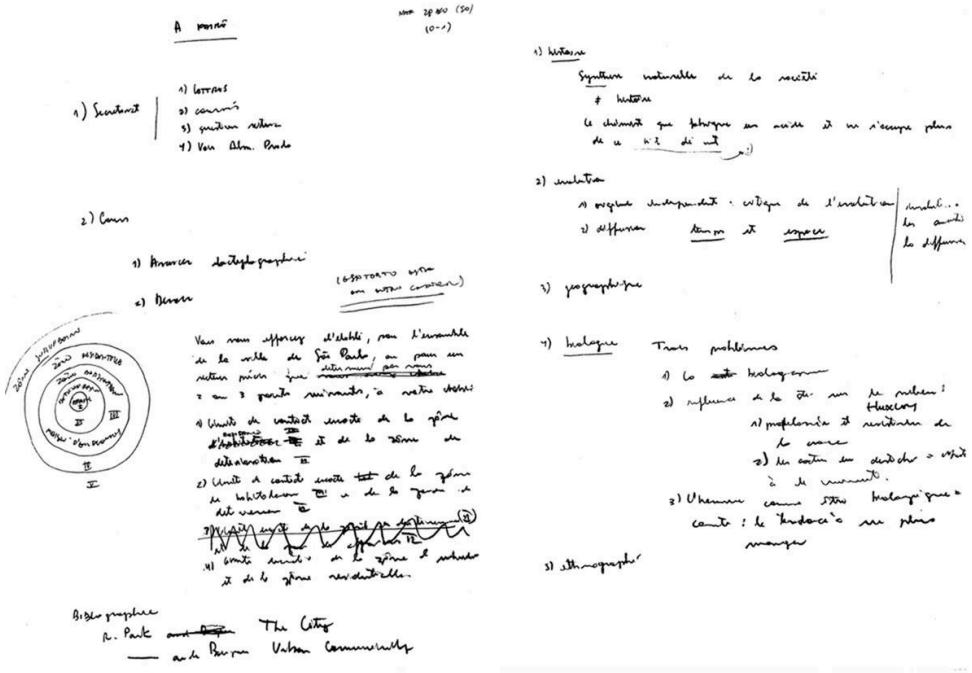
Décio de Almeida Prado, a theatre critic and one of Lévi-Strauss' students, recalls "the professor's concern with direct observation and field research, which he encouraged among his students" (Peixoto, 1998: 88). He notes: "One of the first assignments [Lévi-Strauss] gave us was to conduct a social analysis of the city of São Paulo around 1820, as it appears in historical documents, identifying what they were and where we would find them" (Prado, 1997). In a similar vein, Brazilian anthropologist Egon Schaden, also one of the Lévi-Strauss' students, observes:

> Lévi-Strauss used to take his students on field trips to demonstrate research methods. This was also an innovation at USP. After a research trip to the north of Paraná, he gave a semester of classes on the original English urban design of Londrina, compared with the formation of the city. It was possibly the first Urban Anthropology course in Brazil (Schaden, 1989: 29).

The notes and preparatory drafts from Lévi-Strauss' lectures at the *Universidade de São Paulo* are now preserved at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* (BnF)[4] in Paris. Among this material are a series of maps drawn by the anthropologist himself, binders of books used in class, notes on his readings, and drafts of exercise proposals. In one of these proposals, drawing on *The City* (Park, Burgess, & Mackenzie, 1925) and *The Urban Community* (Burgess, 1926) as references, the young professor instructs his students to analyse the city of São Paulo, examining various aspects of its urban interactions and dynamics.

Figure 1

Notes related to the drafts prepared for courses taught by Lévi-Strauss at the Universidade de São Paulo (USP). We can see an exercise proposed by Lévi-Strauss, referencing texts by R. Park and E. Burgess, as well as the drawing of "concentric zones" adopted in the Chicago School studies and applied by Lévi-Strauss in his proposal for the city of São Paulo. Reproduction hand-drawn by the author during archival research. Notes from the author's personal collection, 2023. NAF 28150 (90). Cours de sociologie à l'université de Sao Paulo. Notes de cours et brouillons.



Both works that inspired Lévi-Strauss are foundational texts and precursors of the renowned Chicago School[5], which focused on the study of urban phenomena, transform-

[4] NAF 28150 (90). Cours de sociologie à l'Université de São Paulo. BnF.

[5] "Not least, however, one local institution which is still alive and well has played an important role in shaping our understanding not only of early twentieth-century Chicago but of urbanism in general. From World War I and on into the 1930s, sociologists at the University of Chicago turned out a series of studies based on investigations in their own city which have been generally recognized as the beginning of modern urban studies, and as the most important body of social research on any single city in the

ing the city from which it takes its name into a laboratory for research and experimentation. The proposed exercise, along with Lévi-Strauss' engagement with these classic texts – then groundbreaking – reveals, to some extent, his intellectual subversion and active participation in the academic debates of the time, as a young professor entrusted with the task of introducing his students at the University of São Paulo to the classical foundations of French sociology.

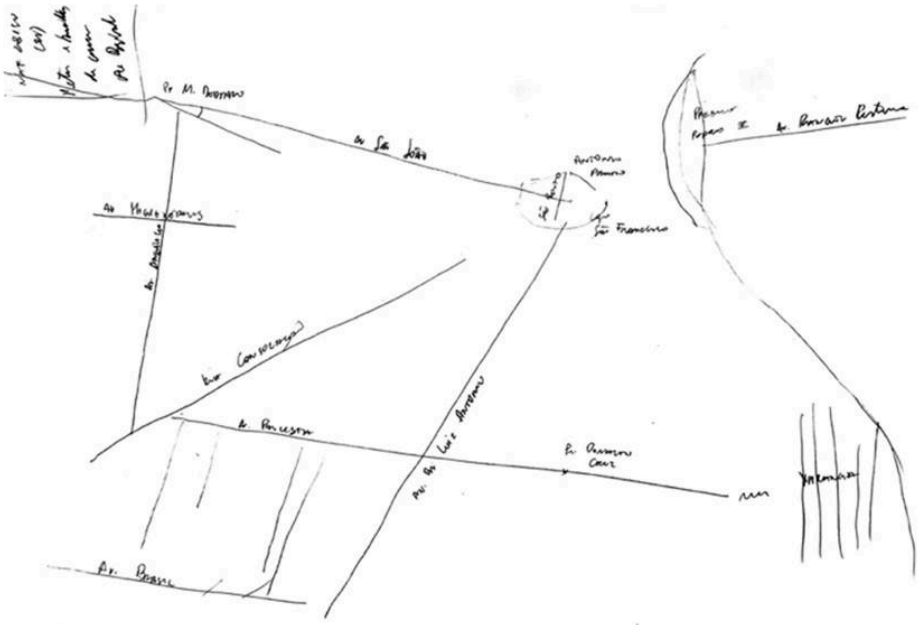
> Long before I got to the United States, I had already been profoundly influenced by the work conducted by the so-called Chicago School in that city between 1915 and 1930, and by the theoretical breadth it managed to convey. The case of Chicago, like that of other New World cities, was particularly suited for analysing the urban phenomenon due to its brief existence and its remarkably rapid evolution (Lévi-Strauss, 1996: 14).

Although Lévi-Strauss' lectures and interest in cities did not, in many ways, give rise to a distinct lineage of urban studies, revisiting his theoretical inspirations and lecture preparations is crucial for imagining the embryonic impulses that could have evolved into an anthropology of cities with a Lévi-Straussian approach. Furthermore, while such a line of urban studies remained undeveloped, we should not overlook Lévi-Strauss' profound interest in the ways in which complex forms of social organisation are inscribed in space, a theme that notably captured his attention among the Bororo, for instance, and one to which he returned repeatedly throughout his intellectual trajectory (Lévi-Strauss, 1956). Taken together, these dimensions allow us to speculate on the contours of what a possible Lévi-Straussian lineage of urban studies could have looked like and what it might still become.

contemporary world. Although it has been reviewed before, we may remind ourselves of it once more in order to incorporate it explicitly into the heritage of urban anthropology" (Hannerz, 1980: 20).

Figure 2

Reproduction hand-drawn by the author during archival research of a map of the city of São Paulo (area near Avenida Paulista) made by Lévi-Strauss. The map is among his preparatory materials for courses taught at the University of São Paulo. The author, 2023. NAF 28150 (90). Cours de sociologie à l'université de Sao Paulo. Notes de cours et brouillons. BnF.



Moving away from the idea of a possible generalised lack of interest in the subject, I would venture to suggest that, at least in Brazil, perhaps due to a simple gamble, the opposition between the fields of anthropology – "the forest and the asphalt" – may have contributed to the fact that a possible lineage of urban studies did not emerge from Lévi-Strauss' observations, even if fragmented. As Brazilian anthropologist Mariza Corrêa (2011: 209) points out, for a certain period, the discipline was marked by the notion that "those who went to the forest, as opposed to those who stayed on the asphalt, were the real anthropologists".

Even though Lévi-Strauss consistently expressed his interest in the urban phenomenon and offered valuable insights into the process of urbanisation in Brazil, as evidenced by his observations in *Tristes Tropiques* and his photographs in *Saudades de São Paulo* (particularly regarding its effects within the Brazilian context), it is possible that his prominence in the field of ethnology may have inadvertently discouraged researchers from developing urban studies that would engage more directly with his work. Moreover, as the French anthropologist Philippe Descola noted in an interview I conducted with him in June 2023

on Lévi-Strauss' engagement with cities, there is, at least within the French academic context, a possible political factor behind the apparent disinterest in his urban observations: it is more convenient to portray Lévi-Strauss as the anthropologist of the "savage" and the "exotic", as evidenced in Agier's case, than to acknowledge the full breadth of his theoretical propositions.

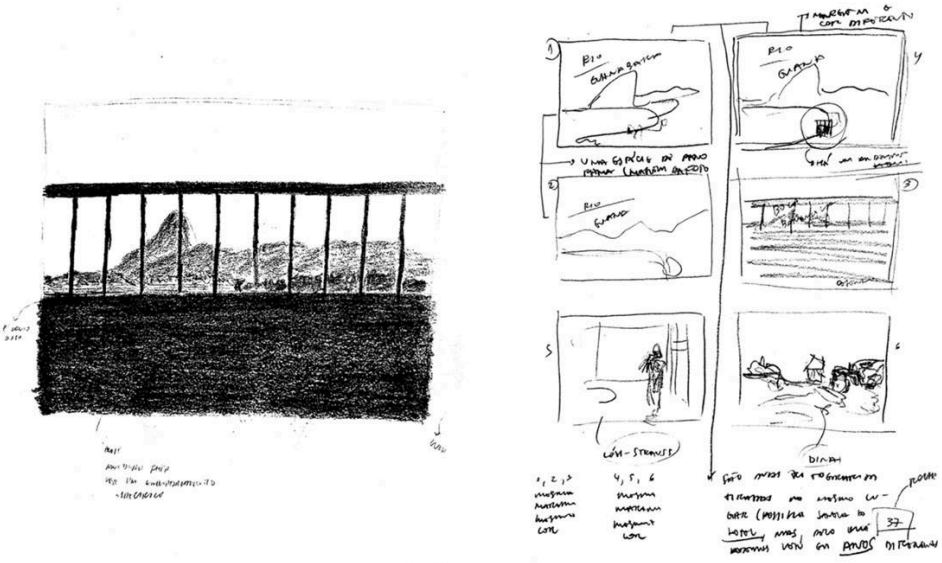
Another factor worth considering may be the way in which Lévi-Strauss' observations on Brazilian cities have been interpreted by his readers in the country. Some of his descriptions of Rio de Janeiro, Goiânia, and São Paulo, for instance, are often regarded as "[...] catchphrases that are not always flattering" (Magnani, 1999: 98). Lévi-Strauss' impressions of Guanabara Bay, in Rio de Janeiro, even found their way into the lyrics of "O Estrangeiro", a song by Brazilian musician Caetano Veloso (1989)[6]: "O antropólogo Claude Lévi-Strauss detestou a Baía de Guanabara / Pareceu-lhe uma boca banguela / E eu menos a conhecera mais a amara [...] Mas era ao mesmo tempo bela e banguela a Guanabara"[7]. Goiânia, on the other hand, with its *Grande Hotel* standing in the middle of the savannah, was deemed by Lévi-Strauss as absurd – the outcome of a "barbaric" and "inhuman" process (Lévi-Strauss, 1955). In São Paulo, as in New York and other American cities, Lévi-Strauss emphasises the "provisionality" (Bloem, 1958) and "decrepitude" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955) that characterise its development: "midway between the builder's yard and complete ruin" (Ibid.: 109).

[6] "The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss despised Guanabara Bay / It seemed to him like a toothless mouth / And the less I knew it, the more I loved it [...] But Guanabara was both beautiful and toothless."". Caetano Veloso, "O Estrangeiro," from the album *Estrangeiro*, released in 1989. Available at: https://youtu.be/uIMZLr7LXVE. Accessed on 1 March 2025.

[7] While working with Lévi-Strauss' archives and manuscripts at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* (BnF, Fonds Claude Lévi-Strauss 28150), I came across a photograph of Guanabara Bay taken by Lévi-Strauss upon his arrival in Brazil. The unusual framing, taken against the light from behind what appears to be a railing or balustrade, evokes the image of teeth in a mouth. I wonder whether, when revisiting his photographs in preparation for *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss might have drawn his famous description of Guanabara Bay from the observations made in this photo.

Figure 3

Notes related to the consultation of Lévi-Strauss's archive conducted in 2023, from the author's personal collection. Reproduction hand-drawn by the author during archival research. NAF 28150 (242); NAF 28150 (243). Iconographie. Brésil 1935-1936: cartonnier bordeaux.



It could be suggested that, perhaps out of a certain resentment, some of Lévi-Strauss' Brazilian readers have fixated on his "criticisms", focusing more on the construction of his sentences or their aesthetic value – such as in the cases of Guanabara Bay, *the Grande Hotel* in Goiânia, and São Paulo – rather than grasping the subtlety and precision of his descriptions of the processes he witnessed. The *Grande Hotel* in Goiânia is not merely described by Lévi-Strauss, in aesthetic terms, as "grand and disgraceful" (Magnani, 1999: 101): in the anthropologist's eyes, it stands as one of the many marks left by a sick and devastating civilising process – one rooted in colonisation, which exploits and destroys both beings and landscapes, further deepening the sadness of the tropics. This perception leads him to connect the *Grande Hotel* with his memories of Indian cities like Calcutta, emphasising their "misery" heightened by their effervescence and urban proliferation: "[...] the urban fact reduced to its ultimate expression" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 150). These nuanced details of keen observation and these connections are precisely what render Lévi-Strauss' reflections on urban phenomena so compelling.

Delving into the landscape

In October 1954, at the request of the renowned explorer Jean Malaurie, Claude Lévi-Strauss began writing *Tristes Tropiques* for the newly launched *Terre Humaine* collection, published by *Plon* in Paris. During this period, Lévi-Strauss gathered his own notes, field notebooks, and photographs from his time in Brazil, along with the notes and notebooks of his ex-wife, Dina Dreyfus – who had left the material with him after encountering difficulties in the field – as well as notes from his brief research in Pakistan and India, thus initiating the writing of his book.

The first version of the manuscript was a true work of "bricolage": the text flowed across the pages with gaps only to mark chapter transitions, sections were glued together, and the margins were filled with annotations, scribbles, and pen corrections. In its initial drafts, the manuscript underwent a thorough revision by his then-wife, Monique Lévi-Strauss. After four months of intense writing, *Tristes Tropiques* was published in 1955. Upon its release, the book became a bestseller – an "unclassifiable" work (Perrone-Moisés, 2008) – blending literature, ethnography, and travelogue, and captivating a broad and diverse audience.

In this work, Lévi-Strauss' observations on cities and urban phenomena are the most concentrated. As discussed, it is here that his reflections on the emergence and development of Brazilian cities are most evident. Additionally, cities such as New York, Delhi, Calcutta, Lahore, and others contribute to the broader cartographic landscape of his urban imaginary. In *Tristes Tropiques*, through a framework of oppositions, Lévi-Strauss contrasts the cities of the Old and New Worlds – European cities versus American cities. He also draws contrasts within the tropics on a macro scale, where "the 'unoccupied tropics' of Brazil are opposed to the 'overpopulated tropics' of India" (Perrone-Moisés, 2008: 72).

Among the materials compiled by Lévi-Strauss in preparation for *Tristes Tropiques*, a small notebook titled "*Carnet Vert*"[8] stands out. On page 17, while planning the book's illustrations, the anthropologist listed potential images, including one depicting the de-

[8] NAF 28150 (11l). Carnet Vert. Tristes Tropiques. BnF.

velopment of São Paulo and a map of Londrina, in Paraná – materials that were ultimately left out of the final manuscript.

On the seventh page of the same notebook, Lévi-Strauss writes[9], as if to highlight the contrasts in his thinking: "*Villes sauvages versus villes domestiques de l'Europe*". About the city of São Paulo, on the sixth page, he notes: "*São Paulo ville laide mais ville sauvage* / *wildness urban*" followed by draft paragraphs that were likely incorporated into the eleventh chapter of the book. In the manuscripts of *Tristes Tropiques*, the chapter dedicated to São Paulo was initially titled "*São Paulo et les villes américaines*", but in the final version, it was simply named "São Paulo".

These details about the elaboration process of one of Lévi-Strauss' greatest works shed light on key aspects of his thinking, revealing the paths his writings and ideas took before reaching their "final form". What is interesting to observe in all this is that his urban observations converge with the descriptions of his expeditions among the Caduveo, Bororo, Nambikwara, and Tupi-Kawahib. Furthermore, the consideration of including images of the city of São Paulo, for instance, not only underscores the significance of his reflections on the city but also demonstrates a strong graphic and visual sensibility that permeates his work. This visual dimension is not merely illustrative but plays a critical role in his method, where images, maps, and diagrams played a critical role in articulating his anthropological insights.

This prompts us to consider the role of images in Lévi-Strauss' work. As early as 1955, *Tristes Tropiques* was filled with drawings and photographs, produced not only by the anthropologist himself but also by the people he encountered during his fieldwork. It is worth noting, however, that Lévi-Strauss attached limited significance to photographic images (Lévi-Strauss, 1994; 2011b; Caiuby Novaes, 1999). In the years following *Tristes Tropiques* and leading up to the publication of *Saudades do Brasil* (1994) and *Saudades de São Paulo* (1996) – works in which photographic language is predominant – the anthropol-

[9] "Wild cities versus domesticated cities of Europe"; "São Paulo, an ugly city but a wild city"; "São Paulo and the American cities".

ogist largely favoured drawings for his visual presentations, as is evident in the selection of images for *Mythologiques*, for example (Debaene, 2018).

> I never attached much importance to photography". I took pictures because I had to, but always with the feeling that it was a waste of time, a waste of attention [...] What I did was zero-grade photography. I published a book of photos because the people around me insisted on it. The editor chose just under two hundred negatives from among many others (Lévi-Strauss, 2011b: 47-49).

In any case, despite the limited value and disdain that Lévi-Strauss attributed to these images, the continuity between *Tristes Tropiques* and his photographic works is undeniable: the materials originated from the same period and the same expeditions. Despite nearly 40 years between their publications, a closer look reveals that *Tristes Tropiques*, *Saudades do Brasil*, and *Saudades de São Paulo* ultimately form a single, cohesive *corpus*. This is further evidenced by the fact that, in its early drafts, *Saudades do Brasil* bore the provisional title "*Les images de Tristes Tropiques*".

All this material adds more depth to *Tristes Tropiques* pages, enriching the texture of Lévi-Strauss' writings through their interaction with images. These images, in turn, provide alternative readings of events, inviting us to explore the geological layers of his thought. *Saudades do Brasil* and *Saudades de São Paulo* stand alongside *Tristes Tropiques* as essential works for understanding Lévi-Strauss' thinking and career. Furthermore, as anthropologist Sylvia Caiuby Novaes (1999: 68) observes, "from a Lévi-Straussian perspective, photography can only be understood when associated with the travel diary and in opposition to the role he assigns to ethnography" – a perspective that adds further nuance to this discussion.

Published simultaneously in 1994 in Brazil (*Companhia das Letras*) and France (*Plon*), *Saudades do Brasil* presents a rich collection of images made by Lévi-Strauss during his time in Brazil. It is no coincidence that the first chapter, titled "First Looks at Brazil", opens with a series of images of São Paulo and the small towns surrounding it, such as Pirapora

do Bom Jesus. This introduction underscores the significant role that cities – especially São Paulo – played in Lévi-Strauss' encounter with Brazil and in shaping his *métier* as an ethnologist. He states: "In 1935, the city of São Paulo, still a frontier town, was visibly turning into an industrial and financial metropolis. Changing from day to day, it offered a fascinating spectacle to the geographer, the sociologist, and the anthropologist" (Lévi-Strauss, 1994: 28). The book continues with an impressive sequence of photographs that capture the details of Lévi-Strauss' encounters with a range of Indigenous peoples in Brazil through portraits, scenes of everyday life, and their diverse forms of architecture.

While consulting the manuscripts and preparatory materials for *Saudades do Brasil* and *Saudades de São Paulo*[10] at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* in Paris, it became evident that, during the image selection process, Lévi-Strauss, unable to identify certain locations he had photographed in the city, commissioned a report from the São Paulo Municipal Department of Culture to verify them.

The detailed report from this reconnaissance mission, carried out by Ricardo Mendes in February 1994 – then member of the technical photography research team at the *Centro Cultural São Paulo*, an organ of the Municipal Department of Culture – sits alongside maps, correspondences, and a set of seven colour photographs sent to Lévi-Strauss by anthropologist Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, his former student and now professor at the University of São Paulo;. These photographs offer a contemporary view of the town of Pirapora do Bom Jesus, captured by her from a perspective similar to Lévi-Strauss' own photography on page 38 of *Saudades do Brasil*. The archival materials also include a panoramic view of the Bororo village, Kejara, which Lévi-Strauss had manually assembled by collaging photographs side by side. This panorama is featured both in *Le cru et le cuit* (1964) and in *Saudades do Brasil* (1994: 90-91).

In his report, Ricardo Mendes emphasises the importance of Lévi-Strauss' photographic collection in preserving São Paulo's history. By capturing regions that underwent profound

[10] NAF 28150 (60). Saudades do Brasil / (62). Saudades de São Paulo. BnF.

transformations, the anthropologist safeguarded fragments of the city's landscape memory, providing a glimpse through his distinctive perspective:

> I'd like to make a few final comments on the set sent in. First, in terms of visual quality, not only because of the "classic" shots in terms of treatment, such as the views of the *Esplanada do Municipal*, provided by the urban complex itself, but especially image no. 7. The photograph accurately registers the replacement of the old houses with a larger road structure, a mass of buildings on which rise landmarks associated with the official sphere or private initiative (Tax Office, Post Office, Light...).
>
> The set [of photographs], although irregular in terms of geographical coverage, helps to fill a documentary void about semi-urban areas such as the Itororó valley. My experience with the photographic archives of the city of São Paulo allows me to express this opinion. Systematically, and quantitatively significantly, there is only the documentation produced by B.J. Duarte in the 1940s for the Department of Culture, in anticipation of the major roadworks undertaken by São Paulo City Hall. However, almost none of this material has been made public, as the physical condition of the recordings, made on 35 mm film over diacetate, has deteriorated rapidly over the last 15 years. Not even attempts to preserve them indirectly through publications have found an echo (Mendes, 1994: 10-11)[11].

Saudades de São Paulo, a singular publication in many respects, resulted from the research commissioned by the Municipal Department of Culture in 1994 for the preparation of *Saudades do Brasil*[12]. The book, entirely dedicated to the city of São Paulo,

[11] A photographic identification report was conducted by Ricardo Mendes and sent to Lévi-Strauss in February 1994. NAF 28150 (61). *Saudades do Brasil*. BnF.

[12] Unlike *Saudades do Brasil*, in which Matthieu Lévi-Strauss, the son of Claude Lévi-Strauss, actively participated in selecting the photographs and shared authorship rights with his father, the initiative to publish *Saudades de São Paulo* came from the publishing house *Companhia das Letras*. The book's organisation was led by Ricardo Mendes, who, in addition to working with the series of photographs previously selected for *Saudades do Brasil*, took on the responsibility of identifying the entire photographic set for this new work.

was published in Brazil in 1996[13], but it never received a French edition[14], even though its manuscripts were initially written by Lévi-Strauss in French and later translated into Portuguese.

In this book, São Paulo seems to emerge as an "invented" city through the eyes of the young "travelling anthropologist" (Caiuby Novaes, 2012), captivated by the contrasts of the tropics that reshaped his European imagination with fresh forms and figures. This notion of an "invented" São Paulo draws on the concept of invention as articulated by American anthropologist Roy Wagner (1981: 13), who defines it as an objective process that unfolds "along the lines of observing and learning, and not as a kind of free fantasy". This city was crafted through the anthropologist's walks, memories, and personal gaze. With his camera in hand, often alongside his father, Raymond Lévi-Strauss, he ultimately constructed his own vision of São Paulo, engaging in a kind of landscape archaeology, shifting its geological layers.

The non-publication of *Saudades de São Paulo* in France seems to have contributed to a certain "forgetting" of Lévi-Strauss' visual works and urban reflections, despite the scarcity of the latter. Even in Brazil, research exploring his visual productions and urban insights remains limited. We have already discussed some aspects of this apparent lack of interest; however, what we aim to demonstrate here is that a joint reading of this consistent body of written and visual material composing *Tristes Tropiques* can offer important elements for outlining what an anthropology of cities with Lévi-Strauss might become.

Among the few works that revisit Claude Lévi-Strauss' urban observations, the analysis by the French philosopher Claude Imbert stands out. In a brief article, he notes:

[13] After the book's publication in 1996, an exhibition featuring some of Lévi-Strauss's photographs made in São Paulo was organised by the *Instituto Moreira Salles*, which acquired a collection of 44 images directly from the anthropologist. These photographs, now digitised, are accessible through the IMS database (https://acervos.ims.com.br/portals/#/search/Fotografia?collection=Claude_L%C3%A9vi-Strauss, 28 February 2025). The exhibition catalogue, titled *São Paulo de Lévi-Strauss* (Lévi-Strauss's São Paulo), includes an introductory text by Ricardo Mendes (1996), entitled "A harmonia dos contrastes" (The Harmony of Contrasts).

[14] During research conducted in 2023, when questioned about the reasons behind the absence of a French edition, both Matthieu Lévi-Strauss, son of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Emmanuelle Loyer, his biographer, could not provide a precise answer.

> Not much attention has been given to trace Claude Lévi-Strauss' urban itineraries, the cities through which he actually passed, the imprint of urbanised sites whose ethnographic experience, imbued with the sense of a lost yet essential counterpart, had revealed their negative image to him, and finally, the evocation of those Amerindian cities, centres of a civilisation that had likely fallen into decline before the arrival of the Portuguese, who were nonetheless dazzled by them. Their vestiges, scattered along the banks of the Amazon, are evoked in *Saudades do Brazil*, after the *Mythologiques* had already restored a form of civil and intellectual productivity that testified to a comparable degree of elaboration. Here we are presented with the archaeological evidence of a hidden equivalence between the mental operations laid out in the *Mythologiques* and the architectures of urban and civic life (Imbert, 2005: 25).

Imbert insightfully identifies a possible continuity between the analytical operations Lévi-Strauss applies to myths and his reflections on architectural traces and signs of "urban life" in the Americas. The "Amerindian cities" evoked by Imbert refer to a passage in the introduction to *Saudades do Brasil*, where Lévi-Strauss recalls archaeological studies of his time, which point to the traces of ancient civilisations in the Amazon:

> In the last several years, archeological research has validated the original observations. At the mouth of the Amazon, the island of Marajo, 50000 square kilometers in area, reveals a multitude of artificial hills, each occupying up several hectares. They are man-made, erected for defense and to protect the inhabitants and cultivated fields from flooding. On the lower Amazon, remains

> have been unearthed of cities where, apparently, several tens of thousands of people once lived, as well as traces of unbaked bricks, substantial fortified constructions, and a network of roads leading to distant regions. Still-discernible differences in types of abode suggest that these societies were strongly hierarchical. Based on these data, it is estimated that the population of the Amazon basin was once seven or eight million (Lévi-Strauss, 1994: 12).

These observations are not far from recent archaeological discussions that, grounded in updated and compelling data, raise new speculation about a possible "tropical urbanism" (Neves; Castriota, 2023). Such studies reveal how the ancient populations inhabiting the Americas before the colonial invasions had already developed complex "urban" forms. Even in the Amazon, long believed to lack "cities," especially when compared to the stone-built constructions of the Inca, Aztec, or Maya empires, evidence has emerged of intricate urban organisations, resembling "garden cities" (Heckenberger, 2003, 2009, 2013). As we have seen, Lévi-Strauss was already aware of the early stages of these debates.

Indeed, the development of studies on these possible Amazonian cities is recent and still ongoing. However, what these "Amerindian cities" revealed by archaeological data present are alternative ways to think about the urban, even challenging our understanding of what a city is, reshaping the image we had of the Forest and its ancient inhabitants. One of our current challenges is to understand how such Amerindian cities might inspire us to think about our contemporary cities. After all, as the Brazilian archaeologist Eduardo Neves and the economist Eduardo Castriota assert:

> Other urban futures – and other urban forms of mediating the relationship between society and nature – exist, among other reasons, because they have already existed. Not through the preservation of nature, but through the production of nature. Not through the allocation of scarce resources but through

> the management and construction of abundant socio-biodiversity. Not through the rejection of centralities, agglomerations, encounters, and exchanges, but with them. What we have here is an opportunity to understand more broadly the *longue durée* of urbanisation and to illuminate possible urban futures (Neves; Castriota, 2023).

In this regard, what the "Amerindian cities" briefly speculated by Lévi-Strauss demonstrate are alternative ways of thinking about the urban. Possibly with architectures more integrated with the surrounding landscapes, beings, and things. Furthermore, as Imbert suggests, Lévi-Strauss presents us with a "hidden equivalence" between the mental operations unfolded in myths and the "architectures of urban and civic life" revealed by archaeological traces. Thus, it is interesting to note that although Lévi-Strauss did not delve deeply into such archaeological speculations, some of these aspects were already observed by the anthropologist through the updated building and habitation practices[15] of the Indigenous populations he encountered during his expeditions in Brazil. This is evident in his observations in *Tristes Tropiques* and his collection of photographs.

One detail that particularly astonishes Lévi-Strauss, which he describes with awe when observing the Bororo people, is as follows: "The inhabitants seemed protected in their nakedness by the fronded velvet of the partition-walls and the curtain-fall of the palms. Furthermore, when they went forth from their houses it was as if they had just slipped out of an enormous dressing-gown of ostrich-feathers. Their houses were caskets lined with down, it might have seemed, and their bodies the jewels within them" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 245). Body and architecture merge with nature through the choice of materials and respect for the landscape, even if these elements were already being affected by the impacts of colonial incursions.

Therefore, when read together, *Tristes Tropiques*, *Saudades do Brasil*, and *Saudades de São Paulo* reveal Lévi-Strauss' deep interest in architectural forms and in the relationship

[15] On this topic, see Caiuby Novaes, 1983; Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995.

between human societies and their environments, their ecologies: whether in villages or in cities. These concerns overflow the pages of the three works and are revisited at various moments throughout the anthropologist's trajectory[16]. Fascinated by the inscription of the architectures of the human mind into space, Lévi-Strauss opens paths for thinking about a continuity in human ways of dwelling, as if we were facing a "group of transformations" in which the difference between a village and a city appears as a matter of scale[17]. In other words, he invites us to consider the "comparison of the organisation of social spaces on different scales" (Philippe Descola, June 2023), an approach that aligns directly with the intuitions and procedures developed within structural anthropology as conceived by himself. In this sense, it represents one of his major contributions to urban studies and a possible cornerstone for a Lévi-Straussian-inspired anthropology of cities.

Lévi-Strauss, anthropologist of cities

As Brazilian anthropologist Marcos Lanna (1996: 329) suggests, *Saudades de São Paulo* may reveal, perhaps even unintentionally, that "Lévi-Strauss was also an urban anthropologist, but he preferred not to recognise himself as such". The image of Lévi-Strauss as an "urban anthropologist", or even as an "anthropologist of cities", permeated the course of this research, leading to discussions with authors deeply familiar with his thought and trajectory.

Cities were a "passion" for Lévi-Strauss, as Emmanuelle Loyer noted in one of our conversations. For Lévi-Strauss himself (2011b; 1955), cities represented a "great sociological phenomenon", "the human invention, *par excellence*", capturing his interest yet never becoming the subject of more in-depth and detailed analysis. During a conversation with Philippe Descola, specifically about Lévi-Strauss' views on cities, he remarked:

[16] For an insightful structural analysis of the architectural forms carried out by Lévi-Strauss (2001), see the text "Hourglass Configurations".

[17] This discussion exceeds the scope of this article; however, these are the themes I am currently exploring in my ongoing research.

> I believe that Lévi-Strauss was interested in the urban from a very early age. He was born in Paris... Well, he wasn't born in Paris, he was born in Brussels, but he came to Paris very quickly and, I believe, he soon immersed himself in the composite and cosmopolitan character that a big city like Paris can offer. Something appealed to him, at the same time as he had an obvious taste for nature... (Philippe Descola, interview conducted in June 2023, author's personal archive).

These considerations resonate with earlier intuitions and highlight an important point: while defining Lévi-Strauss as an "urban anthropologist" is neither accurate nor the intention of this work, his deep interest and fascination with cities and urban phenomena, a theme repeatedly emphasised by the anthropologist himself (Lévi-Strauss, 1955; 1988; 1996; 2011b)[18], cannot be overlooked.

By taking the city of São Paulo as a laboratory, placing the city at the centre of the analyses proposed to his students, in exercises drawing on influential urban studies of the time, Lévi-Strauss initiated significant movements not only in teaching but also in exercising his critical gaze upon the studied spaces. This is evidenced by his vivid descriptions of cities in *Tristes Tropiques* and his photographs in *Saudades de São Paulo*. As Marcos Lanna demonstrates, the true potential of this material lies in what it can offer its readers:

> Like *Tristes Tropiques*, *Saudades de São Paulo* gives the Brazilian reader, and not just Social Scientists, a more accurate idea of what anthropology is, because it makes us wonder about our own society. This is because we come into contact with a powerful interpretation of our reality, this time mainly visual. But also,

[18] See also Claude Lévi-Strauss' interview with Fernando Eichenberg for the *Boulevard Brasil* series, 2005. Available at: https://youtu.be/PRqg9g5zuIE?si=0lNFfT-KhR51GTVd. Accessed on 19 December 2023.

> because this is an interpretation of an "other" São Paulo, already past, if still the same. In other words, through the São Paulo presented to us by Lévi-Strauss, each reader becomes an anthropologist by re-evaluating their own vision of the city. More generally, Lévi-Strauss' texts on Brazil force each Brazilian reader to step outside themselves (Lanna, 1996: 230-231).

As discussed, by "inventing" his own São Paulo, just as he did with other cities throughout his work, Lévi-Strauss ultimately shaped his own conception of what a "city" is. Inventing a city is no simple task. As Roy Wagner (1981: 96) points out, "a great invention is 'reinvented' many times and in many circumstances as it is taught, learned, used, and improved, often in combination with other inventions", much like a work of "bricolage". In this sense, just as Lévi-Strauss invented his cities, this research has, in a way, invented a Lévi-Strauss of its own: a Lévi-Strauss as an "anthropologist of cities" who, without being strictly defined as an "urban anthropologist", offers a rich and expansive panorama of reflections.

Thus, while Lévi-Strauss cannot be strictly defined as an "urban anthropologist" – nor can we fully move beyond the invention of a Lévi-Strauss as an "anthropologist of cities" – it is crucial to trace the "residues", "debris of events", and "fossilized witnesses" (Lévi-Strauss, 1962) of his reflections on cities and urban phenomena to become ourselves anthropologists of our own time. This endeavour involves revisiting and reimagining the fertile foundations embedded in the landscape of Lévi-Strauss' experiences – a "classic" whose work remains a vital point of reference in the formation of the anthropological discipline. Adopting Lévi-Strauss' thought as a lens through which to observe both the world and anthropology itself is an ongoing exercise of gaze, one where reason and sensibility converge.

Cities, we might say, are "a set of places that are part of Lévi-Strauss' trajectory, to which he applies his thought, comparing and connecting them through what he himself calls his 'mental travelling'" (Perrone-Moisés, 2008: 72). This process closely mirrors the

intuitions that guide his studies of myths (Lévi-Strauss, 1964; 1983). Indeed, his "mental travelling" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955) is intrinsic to his structural method for observing the world.

Broadly speaking, Lévi-Strauss' name is "inseparable from what, after him, we have called Structural Anthropology" (Descola, 2008: 08). As he himself observed: "Probably there is something deep in my own mind, which makes it likely that I always was what is now being called a structuralist" (Lévi-Strauss, 1978: 02). In summary,

> Structural anthropology starts from two sets of considerations. On the one hand, the institutions, beliefs and customs of humanity offer an incredibly confusing and complex picture behind which the anthropologist must discover order and reason. On the other hand, this task, which is that of any scientific research, is made extremely difficult by the fact that the variables that act on human phenomena are incomparably more numerous than those with which the physical and natural sciences are concerned [...]. Structural anthropology then turned to mythology, trying to show that the mythical discourse of a large number of societies between which historical and geographical relationships are postulated can be traced back to a vast group of transformations: some simple myths, perhaps even a single one, produce other myths that remain united to the first by relationships of correlation, symmetry and inversion (Lévi-Strauss, 1975).

Italian anthropologist Massimo Canevacci (2004: 81-82) presents a bold thesis: "If Lévi-Strauss had had his contacts with 'wild thought' in France, without spending long periods in large American capitals such as São Paulo or New York, he might not have gathered all the elements that would have made it possible to develop his specific method, structuralism". According to Canevacci, the metropolitan landscapes of both South and North America were crucial to Lévi-Straussian structuralist elaborations, fostering a reciprocal reflection between the anthropologist and the urban environment. He further suggests that structuralist intuitions were already present in Lévi-Strauss' descriptions of São Paulo in *Tristes Tropiques*.

In the introduction to *Saudades de São Paulo*, Lévi-Strauss (1996: 11) directly addresses Canevacci's argument: "The author of a recent book dedicated to São Paulo expends a great deal of ingenuity to demonstrate the thesis according to which the revelation of structuralism came to me from contact with São Paulo and New York". After clarifying the temporal gap between his experiences in each city, he adds: "Although I admire the subtlety of the author, who invokes the absence of the temporal dimension proper to the cities of the New World, I would put at the end what he puts at the beginning". In other words, he concludes: "What is true is that structuralism explains my interest in cities and that it made me see them from an angle that, to put it simply, can be called morphological"[19].

Lévi-Strauss' response to Canevacci is notable because it acknowledges the "ingenuity" of the latter's argument while reframing it within his own intellectual trajectory. As Lévi-Strauss repeatedly emphasised, his structuralist intuitions were present from the early stages of his career, even before the full development of his theoretical framework. These intuitions undoubtedly shaped his observations not only in American cities but also in his ethnographic work among Indigenous peoples in Brazil. As Canevacci mentioned, traces of the structuralist method are already obvious in *Tristes Tropiques*. However, what Canevacci seems to overlook is that these descriptions were written twenty years after Lévi-Strauss' time in Brazil and were refined through his engagement with Roman Jakobson and structural linguistics in New York.

Considering the chronological order of these events allows for a shift from viewing Lévi-Strauss' insights as mere "revelations" to situating them within the broader process of constructing his intellectual landscape. This perspective is crucial for understanding how his precise descriptions and analyses of cities like São Paulo were both products of and contributions to the maturation of the structuralist intuitions that accompanied him throughout his career. While Lévi-Strauss already demonstrated a sharp observational sensibility and an intuition for structural patterns during his time in Brazil (1935–1939),

[19] For more on these morphological inspirations, see Mauss (1950).

it was only after his engagement with structural linguistics in the United States (1941–1948) that he could revisit his Brazilian material in *Tristes Tropiques* and fully articulate these experiences within a structuralist framework. By tracing this development – considering Canevacci's perspective and acknowledging the nature of Lévi-Strauss' intellectual formation – it becomes evident how both South and North American cities, each in its own way, played a significant role in shaping Lévi-Strauss' thought.

However, what stands out most at this point is Lévi-Strauss' assertion that structuralism was the driving force behind his interest in cities. This interest not only demonstrates how his observations on urban phenomena evolved alongside his intellectual trajectory. It allowed him to develop insights and analyses across different scales and dimensions of human expression, while potentially opening new perspectives on the understanding of cities, in morphological and ecological terms, for example. Indeed, as the anthropologist notes:

> Should the structuralist approach deserve some attention, the reason would lie not only on the theoretical but also on the practical level. It will be on account of what we have learnt from the so-called primitive cultures which we study, namely that reality can be meaningful not only on the abstract plane of scientific knowledge but also on the plane of sensory perception. We are thus encouraged to cancel the long-lasting divorce between intelligibility and sensibility that an outmoded empiricism and mechanicism have forced upon us, and to reestablish some kind of harmony between man's everlasting quest for meaning and the world in which he lives: a world made of shapes, colors, textures, flavors and odors. In the long run, structuralism teaches us to love and respect the ecology, because it is made up of living things, of plants and animals from which since it began, mankind did not only derive its sustenance but also, for such a long time, its deepest aesthetic feelings as well as its highest moral and intellectual speculations (Lévi-Strauss, 1983: 165).

As we shall see, Lévi-Strauss's profound admiration for the spectacles of nature, an intrinsic thread woven into his structuralist project, also permeates his fascination with cities and the urban. In the twelfth chapter of *Tristes Tropiques*, the anthropologist masterfully paints a vivid panorama of the emergence of the bustling agglomerations of a "community and urban life" in Brazil's interior. At the time, he writes:

> The agglomerations then coming into being were not like the towns of today. There was none of that ever-more-complete uniformity in which administrative distinctions alone differentiate one city from another and all trace of origins has been worn away. No: these towns could be examined as a botanist examines his plants. And by the name, the look, or the structure of each town one could trace their affiliations with one or other branch of that urban kingdom which Man has added to Nature (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 124).

Indeed, American sociologist Robert Ezra Park (1925: 01), in "The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment" – one of the foundational texts of the Chicago School – argues that "the city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction". According to Park, the city "[...] is involved in the vital process of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature" (ibid.). Echoing this perspective, in *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss offers a concise yet profound description of the city: "[...] is both natural object and a thing to be cultivated; individual and group; something lived and something dreamed; it is *the* human invention, *par excellence*" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 122). Even in this definition, he adheres to a core aspect of structural anthropology: the dynamic between Nature and Culture (Descola, 2009; Charbonnier, 2015). In this sense, by framing the city as both a natural and cultural thing and recognising the "urban kingdom which Man has added to Nature", Lévi-Strauss reaffirms the continuity between human societies and their environments, their ecologies, an insight that remains essential considering the climate crisis we face today.

Towards the "wild city"

For American historian William Cronon (1991: 18), in his book *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, the division between humans and nature "blinds us to the deeper unity beneath our own divided perceptions". This separation, according to Cronon, finds its most pronounced expression in the city, which stands as the ultimate symbol of humanity's "conquest" over nature, a conquest defined by the deep traumas and violence of an unrelenting civilising process. Lévi-Strauss witnessed this process firsthand during his time in Brazil, where he observed the rise of cities in the "heart of the forest" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 136).

Lévi-Strauss' perspective on the colonial process unfolding in Brazil – on Western civilisation's relentless "quest for power" and progress, which underpins the sadness of the tropics – is intricately tied to his understanding of the urban and the disproportionate relationships between human beings and Nature. This is precisely why his recognition of cities as an integral part of nature, a "kingdom" constructed by humans alongside others, is so compelling. As Cronon (1991: 19) emphasises: "Recognizing nature in the city, where our language itself has taught us to believe nature no longer exists, challenges our ability to see the world clearly – but to miss the city's relation to nature and the country is, in fact, to miss much of what the city is". He continues: "And in that fact lies the measure of our moral responsibility for each other and for the world, whether urban or rural, human or natural. We are in this together."

One of the greatest lessons of Lévi-Strauss and his structural method for studying cities and urban phenomena lies here. This lesson is subtly interwoven throughout Lévi-Strauss' work, an "anthropologist of cities", revealing its full coherence when considered within the broader context of his entire intellectual trajectory. If, for Lévi-Strauss, the city is "*the* human invention, *par excellence*" (1955), we must critically examine what this "humanity" and "humanism" truly entail, questioning their meanings and implications.

As Cronon reminds us, reconnecting the city to nature implies acknowledging a "moral responsibility" towards our relationship with the world. And, as Lévi-Strauss teaches us,

we can find inspiration for this morality by turning our attention to those who have always been excluded from the "civilisation" and "humanity" that seek refuge in cities, those whose existence is continually threatened by the relentless pursuit of "progress" (Lévi-Strauss, 1952) and the illusions of the "[...] normal, white, adult man" (Lévi-Strauss, 1962a: 03). In the conclusion of the third volume of *Mythologiques* (1968), Lévi-Strauss writes:

> When they assert, on the contrary that "hell is ourselves", savage peoples give us a lesson in humility which, it is to be hoped, we may still be capable of understanding. In the present century, when man is actively destroying countless living forms, after wiping out so many societies whose wealth and diversity had, from time immemorial, constituted the better part of his inherence, it has probably never been more necessary to proclaim, as do the myths, that sound humanism does not begin with oneself, but puts the world before life, life before man, and respect for the other before self-interest: and that no species, not even our own, can take the fact of having been on this earth for one or two million years – since, in any case, man's stay here will one day come to an end – as an excuse for appropriating the world as if it were a thing and behaving on it with neither decency nor discretion (Lévi-Strauss, 1968: 422).

Although Lévi-Strauss expresses both admiration and fascination for cities and the urban environment, he does not hesitate to critically examine this phenomenon. As he observes: "Whether it is the mummified cities of the Old World or the fetal cities of the New, it is to urban life that we are accustomed to associate our highest material and spiritual values" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 150). It is also within cities that we commonly place the idea of "civilisation" and its progress. However, the problem of cities and urban ways of life emerges "[...] when the city stops being an urban site enclosed within its boundaries, even if these boundaries periodically widen out to become a sort of fast-growing organism that, at its periphery and to an ever-increasing depth, secretes a destructive virus; a virus which gnaws at all the life forms except those by-products of its activity, which it scatters outside by expelling them" (Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 333-334). Consequently, the anthropologist

warns: “City man then finds himself cut off from that nature, the contact with which can alone regulate and regenerate his psychic and biological rhythms” (Ibid.). A trauma that has accompanied the delusions of Western civilisations for a long time.

> The population explosion, for which the West shares the responsibility, is reducing the living space between humans at an alarming rate. As for progress, it is devouring itself. More and more, the advances of science and technology, including medical breakthroughs – a blessing for individuals, an evil for our species – have as their principal objective, often used as a pretext, the correction of the harmful consequences of previous innovations. And when that end is achieved, further ill-fated consequences will result, for which it will be necessary to devise other inventions as a remedy. Dispossessed of our culture, stripped of values that we cherished – the purity of water and air, the charms of nature, the diversity of animals and plants – we are all Indians henceforth, making of ourselves what we made of them (Lévi-Strauss, 1994: 19).

As the Italian anthropologist Salvatore D'Onofrio (2018: 52) highlights, “Lévi-Strauss traces the origins of catastrophes back to population growth and the emergence of urban life”. For Lévi-Strauss (1955), cities, understood as creations of the human mind and subordinate to it, operate as “inertia-producing machines” (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 478), forming an “entropic” structure[20], closed in on itself and progressing towards degradation: “‘Entropology’, not anthropology, should be the word for the discipline that devotes itself to the study of this process of disintegration in its most highly evolved forms” (Ibid.: 478-479). Confronted by the climate crises and today’s socio-ecological challenges, this is a compelling approach to thinking about cities, in the vein of what Massimo Canevacci (2004: 92-94) had already called Lévi-Strauss’ “urban entropology”.

The study of the mechanisms behind these “inertia-producing machines”, as inspired by Lévi-Strauss, has been a guiding thread of my recent research. Delving into the intricate urban architectures of the human mind, as unveiled by Lévi-Strauss, both the

[20] On the notions of “structure” and “entropy” in Lévi-Strauss, see Almeida (2021).

beauty and brutality of the spectacle of cities emerging in the "heart of the forest" can be captured. Anthropology, in this sense, can bring us "[...] a fresh eye to the problems of the contemporary world, not claiming to solve them on its own but offering the hope of a better understanding of them" (Lévi-Strauss, 2011a: 09). It is true that cities today embody the tormented core of this complex "world of merchandise" (Kopenawa & Albert, 2010), which incessantly devours landscapes, beings, and things. However, cities have not always been this way, and there is an urgent need to rethink urban ways of life (Krenak, 2020; 2022a; 2022b), to reimagine them at the intersection of human relations with nature, understanding the cities as "both natural object and a thing to be cultivated", as Lévi-Strauss (1955: 122) points out. Indeed,

> Let us begin by proclaiming that respect for life – even life human – does not exist in a society determined to destroy irreplaceable forms of life, whether animal or vegetable; that love for the past is a lie in cities where the need for growth has caused men to massacre all the vestiges of what they once were and of those who made them; and that the cult of beauty and truth is incompatible with seashores being turned into shanty towns and ghettoes and with the sides of "national" roads turned into garbage dumps (Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 335).

By placing cities back in nature, a nature profoundly touched by human activities, questioning the tortuous paths of Western civilisation's relentless quest for power and "progress", and emphasising the profound relevance of the autochthonous knowledge of so-called "savage" and "primitive" peoples (Carneiro da Cunha, 2012), Lévi-Strauss offers us an opportunity for redemption: a chance to rediscover humility in the face of the spectacles of nature that have been disregarded for centuries by the Western civilisation. An opportunity to carefully observe the beauties and mysteries of the Earth and the landscapes where we build our homes, project and imagine our cities, and share our dwelling with a myriad of other beings and things – countless animal and plant species, sources of the deepest speculations of human creativity (Lévi-Strauss, 1962b). This is what Lévi-Strauss so masterfully perceived from the Indigenous people he studied, with profound

admiration and respect. We must bear in mind, however, as the French anthropologist Frédéric Keck highlights, that the Lévi-Straussian ecological approach,

> does not consist in finding a solution to the ecological problems of our time in the "people of nature". It aims, on the contrary, to find in these societies on the point of firing a "reduced model" of what humanity was able to be at its beginnings, not through a nostalgia for its origins compensating for the longing for the end to come, but because the conditions for the survival of a society appear more clearly in those societies that reinvent the rules of communal life in the face of a catastrophe (Keck, 2011: 76).

Reinventing and reimagining the rules for living together in our cities, especially in the emergency of the catastrophes and political crises currently affecting our planet and societies, appears urgent and stands among the greatest challenges of our time. That is why it is crucial to bring a certain humanity back to an attitude of humility towards nature, to once again find in it the inspiration for new speculations and to repopulate the landscapes of our political and urban imaginary.

In 1962, Lévi-Strauss published *La pensée sauvage* (Wild Thought), a groundbreaking book that reshaped anthropology and the human sciences at the time. The book's significance lies in its questioning of hegemonic modes of knowledge production, demonstrating operations of thought that exist in distant societies as well as in Western thought itself. It is a pioneering break with the colonialist discourses that had long dominated the field of anthropology and foregrounded the thought of those considered "primitive" and "savage". Furthermore, "It was also a pioneering work in that it positioned anthropology within Euro-American societies' reflections on the destruction of the human environment by globalised capitalism" (Keck, 2025: 08).

It is important to highlight that one of the aspects of what Lévi-Strauss calls *pensée sauvage* (wild thought) is precisely that it is "[...] a thought that makes nature visible and expressible, through the classifications and inversions it imposes on it, but it is also a

thought that finds within itself the creative dynamics of nature, embracing its dimension as both cultural and natural" (Keck, 2004: 19-20). This operation, which seems to be rooted in the creative mechanisms of the human mind, unfolds in the process of architecting this "urban kingdom which Man has added to Nature" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 122) and in the exchanges between humans, beings, and the things surrounding them.

> Transposed to the level of mechanical civilization, we thus encounter that reciprocity of perspectives in which man and the world mirror each other, and which alone seemed able to account for the properties and capabilities of wild thought. An exotic observer would no doubt judge traffic in the downtown of a major city or on a highway to be beyond human faculties; and it is in fact beyond them in that it entails a confrontation, not exactly between either men or natural laws, but between systems of natural forces humanized by the intentions of drivers, and men transformed into natural forces by the physical energy of which they are the mediators (Lévi-Strauss, 1962b: 294).

When describing the city of São Paulo in *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss (1955: 108) writes: "And yet São Paulo never seemed ugly to me: it was a wild city like all American cities". Following this statement, he goes on to describe the process of building the city, highlighting its relationship with the rivers, its colonial roots, the streets, the villages, the bush, and the swamps. From there, we can see how the city and nature are intertwined in the observations made by Lévi-Strauss. This entanglement is part of the reflective play in which "man and the world mirror each other" and which underlies the operations of wild thought. In addition to offering a better understanding of the reciprocities between "humans" and "the world", in which cities represent one of the highest expressions of the dynamics enacted by the human mind in its speculations and exchanges with nature, the wild though can be seen as a way of venturing into a journey towards a "wild city"[21]. A

[21] This is another discussion that goes beyond the scope of this article, and which I have been developing in my current research. What is presented here gathers some of the key threads of reflection that have guided my thinking and that require further deepening and maturation, particularly concerning the notion of cities at the confluence of nature and culture, as articulated by Lévi-Strauss.

city – if such a city is possible – that unfolds new paths for reinventing and reimagining our urban and political imaginaries. A city attuned to speculative potential, drawing its creative strength from Nature, welcoming differences within its bounds, and finding its place in the world with respect and humility. A city that "[...] may establish a better balance between present and past, change and stability, the uprooted city man and the lasting truths of the world" (Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 336).

Therefore, Lévi-Strauss' observations on cities and urban phenomena allow us to open paths for speculating on the axes that might guide a possible anthropology of cities. This field of study, as proposed here, would follow the intuitions of his structuralist program, revisiting and updating its foundations, drawing inspiration from the potential of his morphological analyses and ecological critiques, taking cities as laboratories of the human mind. An anthropology that positions itself in the analysis of interactions and exchanges between complex forms of social organisation and spatial configurations, opening the frameworks of a complex group of transformations in which the city and village are not in a relation of hierarchy, but of continuity and confluence. An anthropology of cities with a research program that ventures into the complex architectures of these magnificent works of the human mind that are cities, allowing them to be approached within the vast and diverse panorama of the many ways of living, constructing and inhabiting this world. Indeed, to follow the itineraries of Lévi-Strauss as an "anthropologist of cities" is to travel from the archaeological traces of "Amerindian cities" to major metropolises such as São Paulo, Paris or New York; from the intricate spatial organisations of the Bororo, in central Brazil, to the colonial delusions of urban projects implanted in the "heart of the forest". These itineraries teach us to observe the strange architectures that surround us and the complex mechanisms that structure the world we share with so many other beings and things across diverse landscapes and ecologies. Fundamentally, this is one of the most enduring lessons we can learn from Lévi-Strauss.

After all, the cities of Claude Lévi-Strauss are those that both enclose and expand architectures; they are spaces in which the anthropologist and the urban environment "mirror each other". What emerges from them is the understanding that urban ways of life

cannot and should not dictate the ways of inhabiting this planet. Because, at the core, as Lévi-Strauss (2011a: 47) himself teaches us, “anthropologists exist to attest that the way we live, the values we believe in, are not the only ones possible, that other ways of life, other systems of values have allowed and continue to allow human communities to find happiness”.

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