

# PRIMO LEVI'S ANTHROPOLOGY OF WORK

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Primo Levi pursues an anthropological analysis of work in several of his novels and essays, stressing its centrality for approaching a definition of humanity. In this note I will consider a range of Levi's texts which feature representations of work, including *La tregua* (1963), *La chiave a stella* (1978) and the short story 'Gli stregoni', collected in *Lilit e altri racconti* (1981). I will also consider Levi's original anthropological conception of the human as a 'maker of receptacles' as expressed in his essay 'Una bottiglia di sole' (1985), showing how this idea is embodied by several characters of the texts analysed here.

The first text considered in my analysis is *La chiave a stella*, which consists of dialogues between Levi's *alter ego*, a chemist working in a varnish factory, and the highly skilled Piedmontese rigger Libertino Faussonne. In every chapter, Faussonne narrates his work-related adventures in distant lands: from India to Alaska, the Middle East to Russia. Since manual work is one of the main themes of the novel, *La chiave a stella* represents a perfect starting point for a survey of Levi's anthropological conception of humankind.

At the time of its publication, the novel was criticized because it failed to adopt a critical perspective on the representation of the working class. But Levi's intention was to leave aside the concept of class and to focus only on the individuated experience of a single manual worker. He intended to write an ode to human work, celebrating it through an atypical representative of the working class like Faussonne. The result is an epic narrative on manual work, narrated through the protagonist's own words, where 'lamiere e [...] profilati [...] sono gli effettivi eroi dei [...] racconti' (CaS, p. 1070).<sup>1</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss backed Levi's choice and regarded *La chiave a stella* as a fine anthropological analysis of the profession of the rigger. In 1984 the Belgian anthropologist had an exchange of letters with Levi, who was translating Lévi-Strauss's *Le Regard éloigné* (1983) into Italian. In his first letter to Lévi-Strauss, sent on 17 January 1984, Levi highlighted the similarity of the anthropologist's theories with various episodes narrated in *La chiave a stella*:

Mentre traducevo ne *Lo sguardo da lontano* [...], mi sono accorto con piacere che le sue idee sull'educazione si avvicinano molto a quelle che ho formulato nel mio 'romanzo tecnico', *La chiave a stella*, e mi sono preso la libertà di farle inviare dall'editore Julliard una copia della traduzione francese. Non so se le potrà interessare; in italiano, il libro è uno studio del

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<sup>1</sup> Levi's works are cited from *Opere complete*, ed. by Marco Belpoliti, 3 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 2016–18), using the following abbreviations: T = *La tregua* (I, 305–474); CaS = *La chiave a stella* (I, 1033–174); L = *Lilit e altri racconti* (II, 237–412); RS = *Racconti e saggi* (II, 997–1142); SeS = *I sommersi e i salvati* (II, 1143–276).

gergo di mestiere [...]. A ogni modo le basterà leggere i capitoli *Tiresia* e soprattutto *Batter la lastra*.<sup>2</sup>

Lévi-Strauss replied a week later (25 January 1984), thanking Levi for the gift and offering some personal observations on the novel:

Gentile Signore,

mi è stata recapitata la lettera con il libro che mi ha gentilmente inviato. L'ho letto con estremo piacere, perché non c'è nulla al mondo che io ami più che l'ascoltare storie di mestieri; e, in questo ambito, lei si è comportato da grande etnografo, esperto della professione. In più, il racconto è di una continua comicità, e mi sembra che la traduzione francese ne restituisca bene il tono.<sup>3</sup>

Lévi-Strauss's description of his contemporary as a 'grande etnografo' should encourage us to consider Levi's representation of work from an anthropological perspective. Levi was consistently interested in depictions of the social and cultural features of human groups across his writing career, from his testimonial account of Auschwitz in *Se questo è un uomo* (1947) to his sci-fi short stories. Faussonne should therefore not be considered an isolated, atypical character, but instead an allegorical one, who stands as a representative of a group of workers, if not of humanity as a whole. Indeed, Faussonne embodies the dignity of the human being, which, according to Levi, is rooted in the well-done job. This was true even in Auschwitz: as Levi recalls in his collection of essays on the Lager, *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986), prisoners managed to endure their horrible living conditions better when able to practice their old jobs as shoemakers, bricklayers, or tailors (SeS, p. 1222–23). Levi's anthropology is deeply rooted in the notion of work, and in particular in handwork and craftsmanship.

Levi's approach to narration also largely depends on these concepts. There is a whole epic to be uncovered and narrated behind the everyday gestures of workers. This concept also depends on the fact that both handwork and narration are different expressions of creativity and alternative declinations of craftsmanship. This concept is made clear in the opening lines of *La chiave a stella*, in which Faussonne adopts several metaphors taken from the technical terminology of manual work to describe the act of crafting a narrative: 'Lei poi, se proprio lo vuole raccontare, ci lavora sopra, lo ratifica, lo smeriglia, toglie le bavature, gli dà un po' di bombé e tira fuori una storia' (CaS, p. 1037). The connection between handwork and narration is also made explicit in the description of Faussonne's hands, which he uses to perform his daily work as well as to accompany his tales with gestures:

Le avevo davanti agli occhi, le mani di Faussonne: lunghe, solide e veloci, molto più espressive del suo viso. Avevano illustrato e chiarito i suoi racconti imitando di volta in volta la pala, la chiave inglese, il martello [...]. Mi avevano richiamato alla mente lontane letture darwiniane,

<sup>2</sup> Martina Mengoni, 'Epifania di un mestiere. La corrispondenza etnografica tra Primo Levi e Claude Lévi-Strauss', *Italianistica*, 44.1 (2015), 111–31 (p. 128). The letters were originally written in French; Italian translations are by Mengoni.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

sulla mano artefice che, fabbricando strumenti e curvando la materia, ha tratto dal torpore il cervello umano [...].

(CaS, p. 1089)

According to Paola Valabrega, the act of writing reveals the connection between hands and conscience, as also seen in the final paragraph of ‘Carbonio’ (the last chapter of *Il sistema periodico*).<sup>4</sup> When she considers Levi’s insistence on the human ability to craft tools, Valabrega writes that ‘Faussonne è un moderno esemplare dell’uomo fabbro’.<sup>5</sup> In Levi’s *oeuvre*, the concept of the *homo faber* represents the core of his reflection on work and an overcoming of the traditional humanist ideal. The anthropological implications of the idea of the ‘man as a maker’ are stressed by Pierpaolo Antonello in his analysis of the short story ‘Il sesto giorno’ from *Storie naturali* (1966), in which a new species, ‘uomo’, is created by a group of demiurges.<sup>6</sup> Antonello comments: ‘È impossibile costringere l’uomo a non essere artefice perché fa parte della sua costituzione antropologica: è infatti il primo requisito inserito nel suo progetto di costruzione dai demiurghi di “Il sesto giorno”’.<sup>7</sup>

The ability to create tools represents the first crucial aspect that needs to be considered in an examination of Levi’s anthropology of work. According to the author, this skill is what defines humankind and distinguishes it from animals. This opposition between humans and animals becomes evident in *La chiave a stella*. In the chapter ‘L’aiutante’, the character of the monkey shares the feature of manual dexterity with humans and can imitate some of Faussonne’s moves; but when it comes to the use of complex tools, it cannot understand how they work and nearly destroys a huge metal structure built by Faussonne. Comparisons between human beings and animals feature prominently in Levi’s works, particularly in the context of discussions of an anthropological bent. In the essay ‘Una bottiglia di sole’ (collected in *Racconti e saggi*), however, Levi offers an anthropological study of human beings themselves.<sup>8</sup> Retracing the prehistoric origins of the human species, Levi questions what biological or cultural turning point marked the passage from primate to ‘Homo’: ‘a partire da quando, da quale scalino genetico o culturale, essi meritano l’etichetta “Homo”?’ (RS, p. 1113). He subsequently lists a series of technological innovations which contributed to the evolution of our species: the mastering of fire, the fabrication of stone tools, funeral rites. Levi is not satisfied by these hypotheses and instead formulates his own proposal: ‘L’uomo è costruttore di recipienti; una specie che non ne costruisce, per definizione non è umana’ (RS, p. 1113).

According to Levi, the building of receptacles implies two distinctive features of humankind: the possibility to conceive of the future and the ability to understand the

<sup>4</sup> See Paola Valabrega, ‘Mano/Cervello’, *Riga: Primo Levi*, 13 (1997), 380–92.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 389.

<sup>6</sup> See *Opere complete*, I, 617–32.

<sup>7</sup> Pierpaolo Antonello, *Il ménage a quattro. Scienza, filosofia, tecnica nella letteratura italiana del Novecento*, (Florence: Le Monnier università, 2005), p. 104.

<sup>8</sup> This essay features prominently in Charlotte Ross’s posthumanist reading of Levi’s works in *Primo Levi’s Narratives of Embodiment* (London: Routledge, 2010).

behaviour of materials. Comparing human-made containers to those produced by animals such as ants, bees, squirrels, and birds, Levi finds a difference in the quantity and quality of solutions found by humans in response to the diverse problems encountered when processing, preserving, or manipulating all kinds of materials. As Robert Gordon has observed, 'Una bottiglia di sole' helps us to reconsider the theme of the human being as *homo faber* from a new point of view: 'it binds manual dexterity to a sense of future time that is unique to Man (containers implying preserving something for the future)'.<sup>9</sup> A quick survey of Levi's writings demonstrates the centrality of containers in his production. In his first work, *Se questo è un uomo*, the writer stresses the vital importance of the 'gamella' (metal tin), seen as the tool most essential to survival in Auschwitz. The tin had three functions for prisoners: eating, drinking, and for use as a chamber pot when access to toilets was forbidden.

The anthropological theories implicit in 'Una bottiglia di sole' are also present in many of Levi's other works. The essay represents not an isolated development of Levi's later years, therefore, but a concise *summa* of a life-long reflection on the topic. Starting from this theoretical standpoint, we can retrace a genealogy of the *homo faber* in Levi's *oeuvre* and attempt to discover its phylogenetic origins. In order to do so, we should consider characters who are not simply craftsmen or manual workers but builders of containers. This phylogenetic path is present in several of Levi's novels, and its representation often follows the stages of the technological development of *Homo sapiens*, from the making of stone tools to the production of receptacles. A first example can be seen in the chapter 'Il bosco e la via' in *La tregua*, Levi's account of his return from Auschwitz. Two characters have decided to leave the Russian village of Staryye Dorogi, where all the other former Lager prisoners are sheltered, and live in the forest nearby. They embody the concept of 'man as a maker' and symbolize different steps of the cultural evolution of the human species. The first is Cantarella, a Calabrian mariner who behaves like a hermit. He masters the technique of building receptacles and then sells them or presents them as ritual gifts at weddings:

Possedeva un martello e una specie di rozza incudine, che aveva ricavato da un residuo di guerra e incastrato in un ceppo: con questi strumenti, e con vecchie latte di conserva, fabbricava pentole e padelle con grande abilità e diligenza religiosa. Le fabbricava su commissione, per le nuove convivenze. [...] Lui, senza far domande, si metteva al lavoro, e in poco più di un'ora, con sapienti colpi di martello, piegava e ribatteva lamiere nelle forme che i coniugi desideravano.

(T, p. 419–20)

The physical and spiritual rebirth experienced by all prisoners after their liberation from Auschwitz and their return to civilization is thus marked by the rediscovery of technological skills. But the role of Cantarella becomes even more relevant if we compare him to the primitive Velletrano, who, Levi writes, 'si era trasformato in selvaggio con mirabile facilità' and 'viveva come i nostri lontani progenitori' (T, p. 421).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Gordon, *Primo Levi's Ordinary Virtues: From Testimony to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 182.

Velletrano wanders barefoot and almost naked, talks rarely, secures his food by hunting and gathering, and sleeps on the ground close to a campfire. Representing a former stage of human history (or better pre-history), Velletrano embodies a sort of ‘missing link’ and symbolizes the passage from our primate ancestors to the ‘Uomo’ on which Levi reflects in ‘Una bottiglia di sole’. Velletrano unevolved state leads him to retrace all the steps of human pre-history, rediscovering day by day the technologies that contributed to the success of *Homo sapiens*:

Ma poiché era figlio d’uomo tuttavia, perseguiva a suo modo la virtù e la conoscenza, e perfezionava di giorno in giorno le sue arti e i suoi strumenti: si fabbricò un coltello, poi una zagaglia e un’ascia, e se ne avesse avuto il tempo, non dubito che avrebbe riscoperto l’agricoltura e la pastorizia.

(T, p. 421)

We find another example of receptacle building in the short story ‘Gli stregoni’, in which two anthropologists conduct fieldwork research on a technologically underdeveloped Amazonian tribe. Although the natives have forgotten many human technologies, such as fire-making techniques, the anthropologists are unable to rival them in the construction of objects from the raw materials available in the rainforest. The tribal chief Achtiti decides to show the Westerners how to build vital objects for survival. He starts by manipulating clay and creating a very simple receptacle:

Achtiti [...] entrò in una capanna, ne uscì tenendo in mano una ciotola di terra e un arco. Pose la ciotola al suolo; raccolse un po’ di terra argillosa, la intrise d’acqua, e mostrò ai due che l’impasto si poteva modellare nella forma della ciotola.

(L, p. 369)

This symbolic action clearly identifies Achtiti as a *homo faber*. Moreover, by building clay pots, the tribal chief implicitly shows the anthropologists how all human cultures depend on the building of receptacles and how all tools are originated through the manipulation of raw matter (which, as a chemist, Levi knew full well).

We find yet another representation of characters building receptacles in *La chiave a stella*, in the chapter ‘Batter la lastra’, referred to by Levi in his letter to Lévi-Strauss as fundamental to understanding the whole novel. The chapter is dedicated to the Piedmontese ‘battilastra’, artisans who produce traditional copper receptacles. Significantly, we learn that Faussone’s father was a ‘battilastra’ (CaS, p. 1095). The prototypical *homo faber* Faussone, able to complete any kind of manual work in any possible condition, thus descends from a lineage of builders of receptacles who preceded him both historically and phylogenetically. He has learnt his skills by observing his father and his fellow workers:

La lastra di rame: e col rame, perché allora l’acciaio inossidabile non era ancora di moda, facevano tutto, vasi pentole, tubi, e anche i distillatori senza il bollo della finanza per fare la grappa di contrabbando. Al mio paese, perché anch’io sono nato lì in tempo di guerra, era

tutto un gran battere; più che tutto facevano paioli da cucina, grossi e piccoli, stagnati dentro [...].

(CaS, p. 1095)

However, the passage should not be regarded as simply a nostalgic remark on the abandonment of traditional techniques and productions, and neither is it simply a reflection on the anthropological mutation that Italy experienced after the economic boom of the 1960s. Levi considers the disappearance of traditional copperworks as part of the necessary and almost natural evolution of human cultures, which is perfectly logical if considered within the framework of the phylogenesis of human work. If we return to 'Una bottiglia di sole' and consider its closing paragraph, we see how Levi projects this genealogy into the future and addresses its new challenges:

È stimolante pensare che il nostro avvenire energetico, ossia il nostro avvenire tout court, dipende esclusivamente dalla soluzione di un problema di recipienti. La macchina per mungere energia dal nulla [...] c'è già. Non solo sulla carta, e si è dimostrata tremendamente efficiente nelle bombe a idrogeno. Manca soltanto, e "soltanto", la bottiglia le cui pareti resistano alle temperature spaventose di cui la macchina ha bisogno per funzionare come funziona il sole. [...]

Pare che questo sia il sigillo del nostro secolo. Nella nostra qualità di costruttori di recipienti, abbiamo in mano la chiave del massimo beneficio e del massimo danno: due porte contigue, due serrature, ma la chiave è una sola.

(RS, p. 1115–16)

Levi points to the building of another receptacle, the Tokamak (a nuclear fusion reactor), as the crucial challenge for the *homo faber* of the future, and as the key for the sustainable development of the human species. For Levi, receptacles are a crucial means with which we can identify the human-animal divide; at the same time, they also demonstrate that our future, like our past, depends on work, and on the path taken in the quest for a job well done.