SOFTWARE & TECH

Claude Levi Strauss The Savage Mind Bricoleur

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Introduction: The Revolutionary Thinker Who Reimagined Human Thought

Claude Lévi-Strauss remains one of the most influential and provocative figures in twentieth-century anthropology. His work fundamentally shifted how we understand the relationship between so-called “primitive” and “modern” societies. Among his many contributions, few concepts have proven as enduring or as rich as the ideas he developed in **The Savage Mind** (La Pensée Sauvage), particularly the figure of the **bricoleur**. This book, published in 1962, is not simply a study of indigenous thought; it is a bold argument that the human mind everywhere operates with the same logical structures, even if the raw materials and final products differ dramatically. At the heart of this argument lies the bricoleur, a metaphor that has transcended anthropology to influence fields as diverse as literary theory, art, design, and even business strategy. To understand the bricoleur is to understand how human creativity thrives on constraint, how mythology works, and why the distinction between “savage” and “civilized” thinking is a fragile and often misleading construct. This article explores the life and thought of Lévi-Strauss, unpacks the central thesis of **The Savage Mind**, and delves deeply into the concept of the bricoleur, showing why it remains so relevant today.

Who Was Claude Lévi-Strauss?

Born in 1908 in Brussels to a French Jewish family, Claude Lévi-Strauss initially studied law and philosophy before finding his true calling in anthropology. He conducted fieldwork in Brazil during the 1930s, living among indigenous groups such as the Bororo and the Nambikwara. These experiences profoundly shaped his thinking. Facing the rise of fascism in Europe, he fled to New York during World War II, where he encountered the structural linguistics of Roman Jakobson. This meeting was transformative. Jakobson’s idea that language could be understood as a system of oppositions and relations, rather than a simple list of words, gave Lévi-Strauss the intellectual tools he needed to develop his own theory: **structuralism**.

Structuralism, as Lévi-Strauss conceived it, is a method for analyzing cultural phenomena—myths, kinship systems, food preparation, art—by looking for the underlying structures that organize them. He argued that these structures are not consciously known by the people who use them; rather, they are deep, often binary, patterns of thought that are universal to the human mind. For Lévi-Strauss, the goal of anthropology was not just to describe what people do, but to uncover the hidden grammar of culture itself. His major works, including **The Elementary Structures of Kinship**, **Mythologiques**, and **The Savage Mind**, all pursue this ambitious goal. He was elected to the Académie Française in 1973 and continued writing until his death in 2009, leaving behind a legacy that is as controversial as it is influential.

Understanding "The Savage Mind"

The Savage Mind, is a translation of the French *La Pensée Sauvage*. This phrase carries a double meaning that is lost in translation. In French, *pensée sauvage* refers not only to the mind of people living in “wild” or non-industrial societies but also to the “wild” or untamed quality of thought itself—the idea of a mind that is still growing, still categorizing, and still making sense of the world in a direct and immediate way. Lévi-Strauss was keenly aware of the potential for misinterpretation. He was not arguing that indigenous people are irrational or simple. Quite the opposite. His central claim is that the so-called “savage” mind is every bit as logical, rigorous, and systematic as the modern scientific mind. The difference lies not in the quality of thinking, but in the domain of application and the tools available.

The book itself is a dense and complex work. It covers a vast range of topics, from totemism and animal classification to art, ritual, and the nature of historical knowledge. One of its most famous passages compares two figures: the **bricoleur** and the engineer. This comparison is the key to understanding the whole argument.

Myth vs. Science: Two Modes of Thought

Lévi-Strauss argues that there are two fundamentally different modes of thought, but they are not hierarchical. The first is the “domesticated” thought of modern science, which he associates with the engineer. The engineer works from a plan. He has a clear goal in mind and selects the precise tools and materials needed to achieve that goal. The engineer values efficiency, specialization, and abstraction. The second mode of thought is “wild” or “undomesticated,” and it is the domain of the **bricoleur**. The bricoleur does not work from a blueprint. Instead, he uses whatever materials and tools happen to be available. He is a tinkerer, a handyman, a jack-of-all-trades who improvises and adapts.

The Concept of the Bricoleur

The word **bricoleur** comes from the French verb *bricoler*, which means to tinker, to putter around, or to do odd jobs. In English, it is often translated as “handyman” or “do-it-yourselfer,” but these translations miss the deeper intellectual significance that Lévi-Strauss gives the term. For him, the bricoleur is not just a practical figure; he is a way of thinking. The bricoleur’s world is a finite one. He does not have access to an unlimited supply of custom-made tools and materials. Instead, he has a “treasury” or a “store” of odds and ends—leftover pieces from previous projects, found objects, objects that have multiple potential uses. His genius lies in his ability to see new possibilities in old things. Every tool in his kit is a “pre-constrained” element; it has a history and a set of existing uses, but it can be re-purposed for a new task.

The bricoleur’s method is fundamentally different from the engineer’s. The engineer asks: “What tools do I need to achieve my goal?” The bricoleur asks: “What can I make with the tools I have?” This is a critical distinction. The bricoleur works by dialogue with his materials. He examines his collection of items—a broken piece of wood, a rusty bolt, a length of rope—and begins to see how they might be arranged, combined, and transformed. The final product is always a **new structure**, but it is one that is pieced together from the remnants of previous structures. It is a kind of “secondary” creation, yet it is no less ingenious for that.

Bricoleur vs. Engineer

It is important to stress that Lévi-Strauss does not use this contrast to denigrate either figure. He is not saying that the engineer is superior to the bricoleur, or that mythical thought is inferior to scientific thought. Instead, he is arguing that both are valid ways of engaging with the world. The engineer represents a specialized, abstract, and future-oriented approach. The bricoleur represents a concrete, hands-on, and present-oriented approach. In practice, of course, the distinction is not absolute. All of us are bricoleurs at some times and engineers at others. Even the most rigorous scientist will sometimes tinker and improvise. What matters for Lévi-Strauss is that mythical thought—the thought of the “savage mind”—operates exactly like a bricoleur.

Mythology, in his analysis, does not invent new stories out of nothing. Instead, it takes existing narrative elements—fragments of older myths, characters, motifs, and symbols—and recombines them in new ways to address new problems. The myth-teller is a bricoleur of stories. He works with the debris of previous narratives.

This is why myths from different cultures often share the same underlying structures, even though the surface details (the characters, the settings, the specific events) are wildly different. The bricoleur is the engine of mythological creativity.

How the Bricoleur Relates to Mythical Thought

Lévi-Strauss provides many examples of mythical bricolage throughout **The Savage Mind**. He shows how indigenous societies use their knowledge of the natural world—of animals, plants, weather patterns, and celestial bodies—to construct elaborate systems of classification and meaning. These systems are not arbitrary. They are based on careful observation and logical reasoning. The “savage” naturalist is a rigorous scientist, but he works with the materials at hand: the visible world around him. He cannot use a microscope or a particle accelerator; he uses his senses and his memory. The result is a body of knowledge that is every bit as coherent and useful for its purposes as modern biology. For example, a myth might use the opposition between “raw” and “cooked” to think about the transition from nature to culture. The bricoleur takes these concrete oppositions and builds complex stories that explain the origins of the world, the nature of social relationships, and the meaning of life and death.

Mythical thought, in this view, is not a failed attempt at science. It is a different kind of intellectual project entirely. Its goal is not to control nature through prediction and manipulation, but to render the world meaningful. It is a classification system for living in a universe that is full of dangers, mysteries, and moral complexities. The bricoleur, whether he is a myth-maker in the Amazon or a modern artist in a studio, is someone who finds order in chaos by reusing and recombining the fragments of what already exists. He is a master of **structural transformation**.

The Savage Mind in Modern Context

The ideas of Lévi-Strauss have had a profound impact far beyond anthropology. The concept of the **bricoleur** has been taken up in fields as diverse as art criticism, where it is used to describe **collage** and **assemblage** artists like Picasso and Robert Rauschenberg; in cultural studies, where it is used to analyze how subcultures create new styles from found objects and borrowed symbols; and in business and design, where “bricolage” has become a term for innovative problem-solving with limited resources. The rise of the **maker movement** and the popularity of **hacking** and **DIY culture**are direct echoes of Lévi-Strauss’s bricoleur. In an age of rapid technological change and environmental constraints, there is a new appreciation for the wisdom of working with what you have.

Bricolage in Contemporary Culture

Consider the following examples of bricolage in modern life:

- Digital Remix Culture: The creation of memes, mashups, and fan edits is a form of bricolage. Creators take existing digital content (images, video clips, audio snippets) and recombine them to produce new meanings. This is bricolage in the truest sense.
- Architecture and Design: The architectural movement known as “bricolage” or “junkitecture” deliberately uses salvaged and found materials to create structures that are both functional and aesthetically provocative.
- Social Adaptation: Immigrant communities often engage in social bricolage, combining elements of their home culture with elements of the host culture to forge new hybrid identities.
- Business Strategy: In entrepreneurial settings, bricolage describes how startups and small businesses succeed by making do with limited capital and personnel, improvising solutions from whatever is available.

These examples show that the bricoleur is not a figure confined to the past or to indigenous societies. He is a universal human type. We all practice bricolage when we cook a meal from leftovers in the fridge, when we repair a broken appliance with tape

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