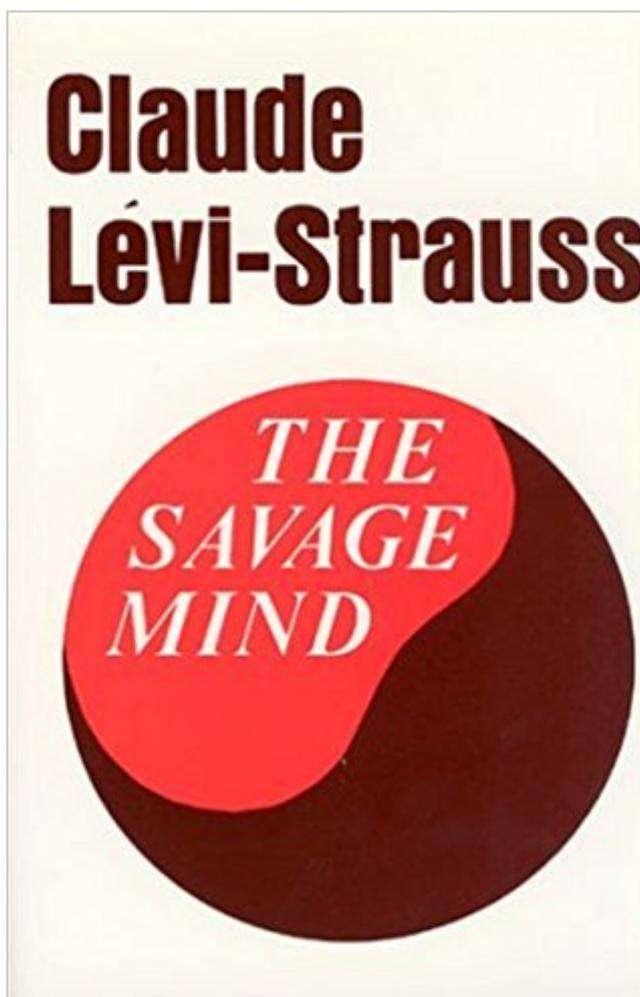


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The Savage Mind (The Nature Of Human Society Series)



Synopsis

"Every word, like a sacred object, has its place. No precis is possible. This extraordinary book must be read." — Edmund Carpenter, New York Times Book Review

"No outline is possible; I can only say that reading this book is a most exciting intellectual exercise in which dialectic, wit, and imagination combine to stimulate and provoke at every page." — Edmund Leach, Man

"Levi-Strauss's books are tough: very scholarly, very dense, very rapid in argument. But once you have mastered him, human history can never be the same, nor indeed can one's view of contemporary society. And his latest book, *The Savage Mind*, is his most comprehensive and certainly his most profound. Everyone interested in the history of ideas must read it; everyone interested in human institutions should read it." — J. H. Plumb, Saturday Review

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Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Academic scholarship does not generally lend itself to masterpieces. One tends to balance detail and complexity against efficiency, to narrow one's audience while deepening argumentation. Thus the truly great books of a particular discipline are often incomprehensible outside it, while the wonderfully accessible books rarely do more than describe what others have done. *The Savage Mind* is one of a small number of exceptions to this rule. In a book that requires no prior knowledge

of anthropology, Lévi-Strauss succeeds in leveling a major challenge to his discipline and simultaneously to every reader. In elegant, graceful prose, he meticulously dissects his objects, formulates his arguments, and stretches the range of theoretical speculation to cover an extraordinary range of material from all over the world-including the modern. In the nearly fifty years since this book first appeared, however, much has changed. Structuralism, for which *The Savage Mind* served as something of a manifesto, has collapsed beneath the weight of its own logical formation and the critical assaults of various respondents-not all of them well-informed. But even that most scathing critic of structuralism, Jacques Derrida, has noted repeatedly that we can never really go back: structuralism is part of our thinking now, and the only way out is through. To put it simply, if you never read this book, you will never gain the right to criticize structuralism as a method for studying culture. Another thing that has changed is basic education. Lévi-Strauss takes it for granted that we all know quite a bit about European literature, music, and art; that we know who the painter Clouet was, and the difference between Mannerism and Impressionism.

The title that Levi-Strauss gave to *The Savage Mind* is a purposeful misnomer. If one did not know better, one might think that the mind of the so-called savage is materially different from the mind of his equally so-called civilized brethren. In fact, the opposite is true. The translation from the French is "Untamed Thinking," a punning reference to the rather unsettling notion that both the savage tribes of popular stereotyping and the cultured elegance of the West engage equally in untamed thinking. Adherents of Western culture like to think--even to brag--that their mode of ratiocination is the very height of rationality and that the thought processes of primitive tribes are based primarily on simplistic homologies between totem and blood animal. The Tarzan movies of the 1930s which portray natives as mindless adherents of a Snake God come to mind. Levi-Strauss notes that the vision of the typical anthropologist is tinted with the fairly recent invention of writing. Each generation of scientist can preserve in writing for perpetuity the results of their findings. It is difficult for such a Western-trained mind to conceive of another multi-generational record that is not based on writing but is every bit as scientific and objective. Where the Westerner looks outward to record data on a fixed medium, the tribesman looks inward to establish an ongoing series of personal relationships that ground him in a mythic medium that flows logically from his non-writing oriented world view. One might justifiably point out that the Western anthropologist has his world view at a disadvantage relevant to his shaman counterpart in that the former has been de-linked from an oral tradition of which the latter makes full use.

Whenever I see reviews that say things like "No precis is possible. This extraordinary book must be read" and "No outline is possible; I can only say that reading this book is a most stimulating intellectual exercise," I suspect that the Emperor's New Clothes Syndrome is raging. And I think there's some of that going on here. I think the big thing that fools people is that the French can go on and on forever without saying much of anything. Maybe they take joy in their language and it loses something in translation. I remember as a young actor playing the title role in Camus' CALIGULA. How much there was to memorize! Some of those speeches went on for pages. Then in my 30s I read Proust. He could make single sentences that went on for more than a page! This book was not easy reading. It took me four days to plow through the first 36 pages, primarily because it was a lot of abstract concepts being explained by other abstract concepts. Add to that the French penchant for subordinate clauses within subordinate clauses. I had to get out a pencil and circle the subjects and underline the main verbs in order to make sense of it! Throw in a horribly pedantic translation, which invariably uses an obscure English word over a more familiar one every time. Then top that off with a poor editing job that leaves out the close parenthesis on one occasion and on a couple of others presents the reader with an unintelligible sentence fragment. It was not an easy book to read. But I do feel that the information it contained was valuable and will help me with the project I'm researching.

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