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‘Bricolage’: reclaiming a conceptual tool

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This article provides the genealogy of bricolage and underscores the modifications it has undergone within the sociologies of culture and religion. It draws on the study of three new religious movements that teach unconventional versions of Hinduism and kabbalah, to show that the current understanding of bricolage in the studies of popular culture and religion overestimates its eclectic and personal nature and neglects its sociocultural logics. It tends to take for granted the availability of cultural resources used in bricolage, and finally it fails to understand the social significance of individualism, overlooking the ways in which norms and power could be expressed through culture in the contemporary world. This article suggests that it would be best reclaiming bricolage’s original meaning, prompting questions about the contexts that make certain elements available, social patterns that may organise bricolage, who ‘bricole’, what for, who is empowered, from what and by using whose tradition.

Keywords: bricolage; cultural resistance; religion; class; subculture

1. Introduction

Despite being untranslatable into English, ‘bricolage’ has had a remarkable trajectory in the social sciences and beyond. The term designates activities of fabricating and repairing, meaning something like ‘do-it-yourself’ and ‘tinkering’. It also conveys the idea of an amateurish or not serious practice: ‘bricoler’ in some contexts can be translated as ‘fiddling’. Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roger Bastide employed ‘bricolage’ as an analogy to depict the ways in which, in reference to traditional settings, cultures generate new myths and religious systems. Adopted within studies of culture and religion in highly differentiated societies, bricolage took a micro-sociological turn. It became synonymous with individual creative practices in relation to youth and queer subcultures, new musical genres and techniques, ‘spirituality’, New Age and new religions drawing on multiple sources. Nowadays, scholars in a wide range of disciplines describe as bricolage the activities of politicians (Samuels 2003), teachers (Hatton 1988), children (Tam 2012), students (Pearce 2012) and virtually every human activity involving innovations such as the making of law (Fourcade and Savelsberg 2006), scientific knowledge (Horlick-Jones, John

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Walls, and Jenny Kitzinger 2007) including new sociological methods (Denzin and Lincoln 1999), information systems (Ciborra 2002) and improvisational activities in the workplace (Baker and Nelson 2005).

This article aims to contribute to the sociologies of culture and religion by reclaiming the concept of *bricolage*, in order to enhance the sociological understanding of the making of identities in highly heterogeneous and fast-changing social contexts – a question addressed (albeit from a different angle) in a previous issue of this journal by Mellor and Shilling (2014). The first part provides a genealogy of this concept, which underscores the significant modifications it has undergone in the French- and the English-speaking literatures.¹ While *bricolage* initially sought to capture cultural change at a macro-sociological level, now it often focuses on individuals' creativity, namely the crafting of eclectic styles, religiosities and identities through personal choice, as a result of the breakdown of social structures and traditions. The second part of the article intends to demonstrate that this novel understanding of the concept of *bricolage* over-estimates its personal and eclectic nature while neglecting the sociocultural logics that may organise it. It often fails to understand the social significance of individualism and overlooks the ways in which, in contemporary society, social norms and power may be expressed through culture. Finally, it tends to take for granted an arbitrary and limitless availability of cultural resources involved in *bricolage*.

To make these arguments, the article draws on the study of three new religious movements teaching unconventional versions of Hinduism (Siddha Yoga; the Sivananda Centres) and kabbalah (the Kabbalah Centre). Not only are these groups' messages a *bricolage* of beliefs and practices, but their members, exploring successively or simultaneously a vast array of religious teachings and alternative therapies, would be considered as typical *bricoleurs* of religious systems. These case studies show that, even amongst the most de-traditionalised religious field, *bricolage* has coherent patterns. Social actors do not appropriate *anything* and are not indifferent to the origins and meaning of the resources they appropriate. Their *bricolage* actually entails selective (and uncomfortable) processes of negotiation and interpretations with what is appropriated. The so-called religions *à la carte* are not eclectic, ephemeral and unique to each individual, for restless explorations of religious teachings are driven by a consistent quest of self-realisation which, as such, reflects wider norms and incentives of Euro-American societies. Moreover, the case studies illustrate the ways in which ethnicity, gender and class still contribute to *bricolage*, thereby affecting who appropriates, what is appropriated and for what. They also show that the appropriation of certain elements is neither random nor boundless but results from macro-sociological and often asymmetric cultural encounters that made *some* of these elements available. Finally, early conceptualisations of *bricolage* defined it as the cultural resistance of the subaltern, while recent ones evoke empowerment without specifying of whom and from what. The article's case studies suggest that in fact there may be manifold strategies of *bricolage*,

including the enhancement of the cultural capital of those who access, and feel entitled to, cultural resources. **In any case, bricolage is still of relevance to the relations between culture and power.**

This article concludes by suggesting that bricolage represents a useful concept to think about the **diversification of cultural and religious practices**, but it would be best doing so by reclaiming its original formulation. Indeed, paying attention to the initial conceptualisation of bricolage would help understanding the logics and patterns of symbolic creativity.

2. Life and destiny of a concept

2.1. *Bricolage's anthropological roots*

The conceptualisation of bricolage was initiated by Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* ([1962] 1966). He uses this term as a metaphor to make sense of the ways in which mythical thought works – that is, as a ‘kind of intellectual “bricolage”’ (17). This comparison insisted on the **incidental nature** of myth-making: Lévi-Strauss recalled the early meaning of bricolage which designated a movement happening by chance – that of a ball that bounces, or a running dog **going off tracks**. Thus, like bricolage, **mythical thought has unpredictable and contingent results, depending on what the bricoleur has at their disposal**. The bricoleur indeed collects objects that have already been used and re-assembles them in new combinations, granting them usages for which they were not initially intended. Thus, the comparison suggests another characteristic of both bricolage and mythical thought: while being contingent and having a ‘heterogeneous repertoire’, their creativity is limited. For the bricoleur’s ‘universe of instruments is closed’ and they therefore have to ‘make do with “whatever is at hand”’ (17). Similarly, mythical thought can only draw on what is already available and its eclecticism is restrained by the borrowed components’ initial and residual meaning:

The elements which the “bricoleur” collects and uses are “pre-constrained” like the constitutive units of myth, the possible combinations of which are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their freedom of manœuvre (19).

Mythical thought, like bricolage, is a compromise which, nevertheless, enables the formation of novel systems of meaning. **Through new combinations, bits and pieces are expressing something different from what they were saying before.**

Intellectuals rapidly expanded Lévi-Strauss’ metaphor. Derrida (1978, 285) made of bricolage a universal ‘critical language’: **‘If one calls bricolage the necessity of borrowing one’s concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is bricoleur’**. Describing human beings as machines driven by desire, Deleuze and Guattari (1984, 1) claim that **‘we are all bricoleurs’**.² However, rather than being concerned with cognitive or psychological functions, Lévi-Strauss was trying to

theorise cultural change. This is evidenced by what prompted his reflection on bricolage: an observation from Boas (1898, 18) that 'It would seem that mythological worlds have been built up, only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from the fragments'. In other words, 'bricolage' intended to capture how cultures create something new out of what already exists.

Referring to syncretism in the Americas, Bastide developed the Lévi-Straussian reflection on culture's creativity – it is unfortunate that his 'sociology of bricolage' (1970) has been largely ignored in the English-speaking literature on the matter. Bastide's 'sociology of bricolage' aimed to explore the relations between cultural reproduction and innovation and to discover the patterns and rules that organise the manipulation of symbolic resources. He drew on Lévi-Strauss and Halbwachs to conceptualise bricolage as a response to the holes of 'collective memory'. It is thus about replacing something missing. As such, bricolage can be seen as a quest for coherence rather than a celebration of eclecticism. Indeed, like Lévi-Strauss, Bastide insisted on the organisation of bricolage: bricolage does not create new components but can only draw on collective memory's remnants. Also, it does not involve a pure invention of imagination because an overall meaning pre-exists and structures what can be expressed, even with the introduction of new components – to use bricolage as a metaphor again, a broomstick replacing the foot of a broken chair would cease to be a cleaning tool and instead be defined by its new function in the 'chair combination'.

More importantly, Bastide (1970) enhanced the conceptualisation of bricolage by addressing cultural resistance and domination. Accordingly, bricolage became a means to analyse syncretisms between 'white' and 'black' cultures in the Americas and the Caribbean: what survived or disappeared of the myths and rituals of populations subjected to the slave trade; how African-Brazilian religions emerged; how African-American populations forced to adopt elements of Western cultures subverted them by using 'white' cultural residues to rebuild or repair 'black' cultural systems. Bastide also evoked how 'white' cultures may manoeuvre 'black' cultures, thereby celebrating their specificities and maintaining hierarchical distinctions: this suggests that bricolage can also be involved in cultural domination – an idea that will be lost in bricolage's later acceptations.

2.2. *Bricolage and cultural resistance in modern societies*

Originally a metaphor, 'bricolage' became an anthropological concept to understand cultural and religious creativity, with an emphasis on what organises it, despite its contingent nature. Transposed in the study of contemporary European societies, bricolage became about *what individuals do* in relation to cultural practices and lifestyles. The idea of bricolage as expressing cultural resistance was reinforced in the most significant discussions of the term – the works of De Certeau and authors from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

De Certeau (1984, xiii) defined 'bricolage' as the cultural tactics of the subaltern, which he illustrated with reference to the Spanish colonisation of the Americas:

Submissive, and even consenting to their subjection, the Indians nevertheless often made of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept. They were *other* within the very colonization that outwardly assimilated them; their use of the dominant social order deflected its power, which they lacked the means to challenge; they escaped it without leaving it.

However, de Certeau extended the issue of cultural domination beyond colonial contexts to find similarities with the ways in which, in contemporary France, 'common people' appropriate the culture elaborated and imposed by the 'elite' according to their own interests (xiii). Bricolage therefore does not entail a rejection of the dominant culture but its subversion. De Certeau's understanding of bricolage as form of cultural 'poaching' resonates with Clarke's (1976) and Hebdige's (1979) applications of the concept to youth subcultures. Both insisted on bricolage's oppositional and subversive significance: through the elaboration of countercultural styles, the working class youths express their opposition to mainstream values. They do so by appropriating commodities while diverting their initial usage and granting them new meanings. The most significant twist given to bricolage relates to the focus on the users of culture and their everyday practices, departing from Lévi-Strauss' and Bastide's emphasis on large-scale, structural and impersonal processes of myth-making and syncretism. De Certeau for instance discusses practices of cooking, reading or walking in the city, while Hebdige (1979, 106) aims to capture how the 'subcultural *bricoleur*' combines elements of clothing and commodities (combs, flags, pins, etc.) to elaborate their own style. In other words, the attention shifted from bricolage to the *bricoleurs* themselves, and bricolage started to be studied as a *practice*.

In addition, in differentiated and consumerist societies, bricolage's internal coherence prompted questions. De Certeau still considered bricolage as a collective activity of which one 'must determine the procedures, bases, effects, and possibilities' (xiv). He nevertheless believed that the contemporary breakdown of 'local stabilities' made tactics of bricolage more fluid and 'out of orbit' (xx). Clarke underscored the social dimension of bricolage, for a subcultural style must allow a group to recognise itself in its potential meanings, hence it must be able to convey the group's concerns and values. Moreover, he noted that subcultural bricolage is constrained by the availability of signs and objects and by their preexisting meanings. Hebdige (1979, 103), however, overlooked the pre-constraints of bricolage, which he sees as 'capable of infinite extension because basic elements can be used in a variety of improvised combinations to generate new meanings within them'. This depiction of bricolage's eclectic character will be dramatised in the term's later usages.

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2.3. *From cultural warfare to playful, postmodern bricoleurs*

The post-modern world is a world of interweaving many stories. What we might call “multi-layered” meaning systems are commonplace, involving beliefs and practices drawn from a variety of sources, both religious and quasi-religious-including Eastern meditation, Native American religion, psychotherapy, ecology, feminism, holistic health, as well as more traditional Judeo-Christian elements. The result is “bricolage” or “pastiche,”³ a religious pluralism within the individual. (Roof 1993, 307–308)

Bricolage has now become iconic of the postmodern, epitomising a sense of fragmentation and deregulation of the social world – the death of traditions and great narratives, the implosion of social structures, the fragmentation of knowledge, the collapse of boundaries between reality and representations, the mixing of popular and high art, the celebration of the local and the heterogeneous, the plurality of voices. For theorists of the postmodern, bricolage illustrates the new era’s depthlessness and its crisis of meaning and representation. Jameson (1991, 96), in relation to postmodernism in literature, evoked a ‘pure random play of signifiers’ that simply ‘reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts ... in some new and heightened bricolage’, yet with no production of ‘monumental works of the modernist type’. Bricolage becomes decadent and artificial with Baudrillard (1994, 35) too, contributing to the dilution of modernity’s political ideologies and utopias. Instead, ‘Repentance is part of post-modernity – the recycling of past forms, the exalting of residues, rehabilitation by bricolage, eclectic sentimentality’.

Studies of culture and religion – loosely – refer to postmodern theories and tend to describe bricolage through optimistic lenses, as a playful and creative mixing of codes. Sociologists of culture and religion have started to understand ‘bricolage’ as embodying the traits of a social world which has broken free from tradition and historicity: in such a world, they describe emancipated individuals choosing, consuming and combining cultural and religious resources of all kinds in unique assortments, thereby elaborating personal identities and lifestyles according to their subjectivity. Thus, not only has bricolage become something that people *do*, but it has also turned into the practice of highly individualistic actors. Previously describing the subaltern’s expression of cultural resistance, bricolage is now understood as evidence of the empowerment of playful and culturally skilled individuals who craft their own lifestyles, religious systems and identities. Bricolage originally implied a quest for coherence as well as pre-constraints and rules that organise the combination of cultural and religious components; it is nowadays associated with indifference to genres, the celebration of eclectic code mixings, and arbitrariness.

Taking for granted this new meaning of bricolage, recent studies of subculture liberally employ the term in relation to club culture, musical genres and techniques such as sampling and hip-hop breaking, or street graffiti, without discussing the term and its origins (for example, Huq 2006, 106; Mitchell 2003; Taylor 2012, 131). Muggleton (2000)’s study of punk culture is a rare

example of a 'post-modern' understanding of bricolage that discusses its meaning. Criticising the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies for over-emphasising social stratification in their analysis of youth cultures, Muggleton significantly contributed to the post-subcultural turn, which main argument could be summarised as such:

... the postmodern 1980s and 1990s have been decades of subcultural fragmentation and proliferation, with a glut of revivals, hybrids and transformations, and the co-existence of myriad styles at any one point in time. This enables post-subculturalists ... to move quickly and freely from one style to another as they wish; indeed, this high degree of sartorial mobility is the source of playfulness and pleasure. They do not have to worry about contradictions between their selected subcultural identities, for there are no rules, there is no authenticity, no ideological commitment, merely a stylistic game to be played. (47)

Focusing on individuals' subjective experience and agency, Muggleton describes bricolage as a creative 'self-conscious act' (41). Thus, 'Constituted through consumption, subcultural style is no longer articulated around the modernist structuring relations of class, gender or ethnicity' (48). Bricolage accordingly becomes the result of individuals' liberation from collective norms and values. Their mix-and-match of resources would illustrate the fact that they are now free to pursue the realisation of themselves through diverse means chosen on the basis of unique, subjective experiences. Bricolage's role as expressing cultural resistance loses its significance.⁴ Social actors' agency, globalisation allowing cultural resources to circulate faster than ever and consumerism making these resources available, all render bricolage utterly ephemeral and eclectic to the point that the survival of styles themselves could be questioned.

The sociology of religion has engaged with the notion of bricolage because of its initial association with myth-making and syncretism; however, it refers to Luckmann rather than Lévi-Strauss. For Luckmann (1979), because religious institutions lose their social control in the modern world, religion becomes a private matter; individuals thus elaborate personally their beliefs and practices from diverse sources. He termed this trend 'bricolage':

The privatization of individual existence is linked to the privatization of religion in general. As for religious themes one is tempted to say with some exaggeration: anything goes. In the global interpenetration of cultures, a vast – and by no means silent, although perhaps imaginary – museum of values notions, enchantments, and practices has become available. It has become available "directly" but primarily through the filter of mass media rather than social relations. The choice is determined rather less by social conditions – although evidently they continue to play a kind of screening role – than by individual psychologies. (136)

The sociology of religion's understanding of bricolage mirrors that used to describe postmodern subcultures. Both refer to globalisation and consumption in order to account for the wider availability of resources and hence the highly heterogeneous nature of contemporary bricolage. Again, 'individual psychologies' supersede 'social conditions' in the making of bricolage. By and large, sociologists of religion have talked about bricolage as **patchwork**, religions à la

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carte and pick-and-mix religions, to depict an increasingly individualistic and subjective form of religiosity. McGuire (2008, 211) thus differentiates ‘purely individualistic selection of elements of religious bricolage’ from ‘consciously chosen religious practices that are clearly expressions of shared values and experiences’. Similarly, when addressing bricolage, Hervieu-Léger (1999, 69, my translation) asserted that

in the domain of religion like elsewhere, we have observed the capacity of the individual to elaborate his own universe of norms and values from his own singular experience tends to impose itself beyond the regulatory endeavours of institutions

This ‘spiritual bricolage’ is said to serve ‘the consuming self’ pursuing him or her ‘well-being’ (Partridge 2004, 117): it is therefore sometimes depicted as a source of personal fulfilment and empowerment. Regarding Sai Baba devotees, Srinivas (2010, 179–180) underscores ‘both the power and pleasure of agency’ involved by their practices of bricolage; as a way to engage with a diversity of religious traditions, bricolage is also, according to her, an empowering ‘skill of living in multicultural societies’. Beaudoin (1998, 149, 178) similarly presents bricolage as an (irreverent) skill, the one of the generation X whose immersion in popular culture and capacity to navigate between reality and simulation enable youths to re-appropriate and renew religion. Similarly, Savastano (2007) emphasises the subversive and empowering properties of bricolage: he describes religious gay men as virtuosos who, through ‘the holy art of bricolage’, challenge the heteronormative teachings of religious traditions and cultivate an assertive spirituality of their own. Finally, it is sometimes suggested that bricolage empowers individuals through the free choices they make as consumers: Possamai (2007, 65–67) associates bricolage with fulfilment in the ‘realm of private activity and pleasures’ through an eclectic consumption of religious and cultural resources, allowing individuals to create their own ‘subjective mythology’.

Sociologists of religion also underscore contemporary bricolage’s ‘high degree of “arbitrariness”’ (Luckmann 1979, 135) and lack of coherence (McGuire 2008, 199). Indeed, Mary (1994) argues that we cannot talk anymore about bricolage in the Lévi-Straussian meaning of the term, since its postmodern expressions do not entail any ‘pre-constraints’ relating to the meaning and content of a limited range of resources that can be used. Referring to Bastide, Mary associates bricolage with colonial contexts, where it represented a process of resistance and compromise. By contrast, he believes fragmentations, paradoxes and heterodoxies to be unproblematic for individuals in Euro-American societies. In this context, Mary prefers to talk about ‘post-modern collages’ to emphasise what he sees as their lack of constraints and tensions. In his view, these collages are not creative of new religious syntheses; they indifferently patch together any religious resource from a seemingly unlimited stock and empty out of them their original meanings. Thus, contemporary society ‘praises the making of collages and resolutely inscribes itself in a conversion to the fragmentary, to a plural and

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imploded reality, consecrating the loss to any reference to foundational and unifying great narratives' (Mary 2000, 194, my translation).

3. Reclaiming bricolage's initial features

The concept of bricolage has proven to be highly versatile. Following the academic zeitgeist, its initial emphasis on coherence and patterns moved to fragmentation, arbitrariness and eclecticism; its meaning shifted from the macro-sociological level of myth-making and syncretism to individual practice. Epitomising change in traditional societies subjected to power relations such as colonisation and slavery, it became an icon of the post-modern era and its most alternative forms of art, religiosity and popular culture. By and large, bricolage has become a casual conceptual tool of the paradigm of de-traditionalisation applied to culture and religion, in order to qualify the ways in which individuals allegedly create personal identities and systems of meaning by themselves. The cultural weapon of the dominated, bricolage is now understood as the empowering tool of playful cosmopolitans, emancipated from the fixity imposed by the authority of tradition. In contrast to this, the second part of this article intends to demonstrate that to fully capture the diversification of cultural practices and religiosity in contemporary society, it is best to reclaim bricolage's original formulation that sheds light on its organisation and the specific social relations it involves.

Three case studies within the sociology of religion provide the empirical evidence for this argument: the Hindu-based Siddha Yoga and Sivananda Centres, and the Kabbalah Centre. The research on Siddha Yoga and the Sivananda Centres involved two years of participant observation and the collection of 80 interviews with the leaders and members of these two groups, in London and Paris, between 1999 and 2005. This research was completed by a short study of the ways in which religious movements that refer to Hinduism are affected by national responses to religious diversity in France and Britain (2005–2006). The study of the Kabbalah Centre, between 2007 and 2010, involved 13-month participant observation and 80 interviews in Paris, London, Rio de Janeiro and Tel Aviv. Interviews were conducted with the Kabbalah Centre's teachers and students, former teachers and students, representatives of governmental bodies regulating religions, anticult movements, rabbis and spokespersons of Liberal and Orthodox Judaism, as well as other social actors interacting directly or indirectly with the Kabbalah Centre such as journalists. Participant observation was also conducted in various events and courses relating to kabbalah in these four locations and other kabbalist teachers unrelated to the Kabbalah Centre, either within or outside a Jewish setting, were interviewed.⁵

These religious movements are particularly relevant to discuss bricolage, since as in the studies of subcultures, bricolage is often associated with religion's most peripheral and deregulated expressions. Indeed, the expression 'spiritual bricolage' is increasingly used to refer to New Age and 'spirituality' (for example, Hume and McPhillips 2006, xvii; Kirby 2012, 39; Partridge 2004, 117;

Sutcliffe 2002, 111), while Possamai (2007) makes of New Age the postmodern religion *par excellence* for its hyper-consumerism, playfulness and, precisely, its eclectic bricolage. Huss (2005, 618–620), in fact, describes the Kabbalah Centre, the group that teaches Jewish mystical ideas combined with pop culture to celebrities such as Madonna, as a ‘post-modern bricolage’ for the ways in which it challenges modernist boundaries between religion, entertainment and popular culture. He also depicts it as ‘a typical postmodern pastiche, which reshuffles and reconstructs previous cultural elements’. Similarly, in order to describe the ways in which disciples of guru Sai Baba make their religious systems and identities, Srinivas (2010, 179) refers both to ‘bricolage’ and ‘pastiche’:

Devotees do not choose one religious system and reject another; they choose parts of different systems, putting them together individually in a pastiche (similar to what Levi Strauss has called bricolage), the ways that citizens experience and craft a multiculturalist approach. In a sense then, the Sai devotees “craft” a religious structure and a religious identity for themselves. They self-consciously shape a devotional identity by picking and choosing parts of the Sathya Sai system of belief for which they feel an affinity. . . . [Identity] becomes a space in which conscious choice occurs not merely between preconstructed identities but also between parts of identities.

As neo-Hindu movements that spread during the 1960s counterculture, Siddha Yoga and the Sivananda Centres are comparable to the Sathya Sai movement studied by Srinivas. Muktananda, the founder of Siddha Yoga, started his ashram near Bombay in 1961 and welcomed westerners before travelling worldwide in the 1970s. When he died in 1982, Siddha Yoga represented a transnational organisation said to attract 300,000 disciples and sympathisers who are overwhelmingly westerners. A woman, Gurumayi (1955–), is currently the leader of the movement. Siddha Yoga implies a strong devotional relationship between the disciple and the guru, who bestows the awakening of divine energy. This experience, as well as meditation and chanting, is supposed to lead to the awareness of God within, also understood as the realisation of the self. The name of Sivananda (1887–1963) is associated with one of the most well-known teachings of yoga, yet he never left Asia. It is his disciples who disseminated his teaching. One of them in particular, Vishnu-Devananda (1927–1993), opened centres all over the world in his master’s name. The Sivananda Centres are internationally known for their yoga Teaching Training Course; like Siddha Yoga, they predominantly attract westerners (Altglas 2014).

The Kabbalah Centre was founded by a New Yorker, Philip Berg (1929–2013), who started to teach kabbalah in Tel Aviv in 1971 to reach out to young secularised Israelis with a non-coercive and spiritualised form of Judaism. Berg returned to the USA and, in the 1990s, his mission became the spiritual growth of humankind. Courses and literature were simplified and detached from their Jewish background; personal fulfilment and happiness became the central aim of the teaching. The Kabbalah Centre claims that 10 million have visited one of its centres, although the number of committed members probably amount to a few thousand only. Today, the majority of members have no Jewish background (Altglas 2014).

These religious movements' teachings, combining pop psychology with yoga, meditation or kabbalah, are appropriated as part of an exploration of an assortment of religious and therapeutic resources by individuals who, most of the time, are neither Hindu nor Jewish and do not intend to convert. They are therefore typical bricoleurs but, as we shall see, their practices and attitudes challenge the assumptions made about bricolage within contemporary studies of religion and subculture. These case studies are particular examples of diverse practices that can involve various social groups, having different motivations. Yet the analysis of these cases in following sections show that otherness matters in bricolage; bricolage presupposes social constraints, coherence and homogeneity rather eclecticism due to personal combinations; and gender, class, ethnicity and more broadly power relations, affect the logics of bricolage. Ultimately, this analysis also underscores that bricolage, initially depicted as a form of cultural resistance of the subaltern, can also be the practice of social actors who can access, and feel entitled to the traditions of others.

3.1. *Otherness matters*

While conversions to Hinduism or Judaism are relatively small in number, certain fragments of these religions are explored by a large public, through literature, courses and retreats, and short-term involvement in religious movements. Contemporary approaches to bricolage explain this by the fact that social actors engage with otherness in a free, unproblematic and playful manner, indifferent to prior meaning of the cultural and religious elements they appropriate. This interpretation is doubtful, as suggested by the ways in which members of Siddha Yoga, the Sivananda Centres and the Kabbalah Centre explore yoga, meditation or kabbalah, *despite* their Hindu or Jewish character. Indeed, I found that, when confronted with the 'reality' of otherness through language, liturgy or devotional practices, these prove to be a source of discomfort, if not of culture shock. Siddha Yoga and Sivananda's Centres' members explain about the Hindu origins of the movements that it is not 'their heritage' and that they 'feel like an interloper in Hinduism', while other interviewees refuse to see kabbalah as having Jewish origins and, in some cases, express dismissive attitudes towards Judaism. Similar observations have been made about westerners who explore Sufism while expressing distaste for Islam (Philippon 2014). Feeling like trespassers in someone else's tradition, those exploring yoga, meditation or kabbalah generally adopt a selection of practices in the context of peripheral, short-term and sometimes multiple involvements, but do not envisage conversion. In other words, the original meanings and otherness of elements used in this religious bricolage matter, and in fact limits the popularisation of 'exotic' religions.

It is because otherness matters that individuals address it in some way: they do so by engaging in a process of negotiation with their pre-existing meanings and roots. Thus, pervasive representations of 'Eastern spiritualities' as malleable and inclusive reflect individuals' desire to, as an interviewee told me about

Hinduism, 'slant it for your own needs'. Particularisms are also neutralised by the belief that all paths lead to the same truth: shamanism is seen as a proto-religion unrelated to specific peoples or places. Kabbalah is often depicted as a primordial wisdom that preceded, and then is distinct from, Judaism, while it is often claimed that Sufism, perceived as a mystical hence 'acceptable' form of Islam, is in fact pre-Islamic and realise the synthesis of all religions (Westerlund 2004, 25–30). All these teachings are appropriated as universal and primordial sources of wisdom, from which derive all religions and philosophies: this allows religious bricoleurs to disregard cultural and religious particularisms and offers them a return to the origins rather than an immersion in foreign traditions.

This approach to otherness questions claims that practices of bricolage are evidence of an ability to engage with pluralism. This is nowhere more striking than in the observation that some of my interviewees explained they 'rediscover' their initial Christian upbringing through the teachings of Siddha Yoga or the Sivananda Centres, while others seek to reclaim Christianity's roots in kabbalah. Thus, some interpret the message of the exotic religious resources they appropriate through the prism of their prior socialisation – for instance by understanding the guru as a Christ-like figure, which makes them part of a community of apostles. This illustrates well Bastide's understanding of bricolage: the meaning of an appropriated element is partly determined by the whole structure in which it takes place. We should be careful not to be over-deterministic in our understanding of bricolage, yet it seems that, rather than absolute indifference and arbitrariness, pre-constraints organise bricolage.

3.2. *Bricolage's coherence*

Hindu-based movements and the Kabbalah Centre themselves contribute to the neutralisation of their particularism and the standardisation of their messages. Their leaders refute the idea that Vedanta and kabbalah are, respectively, Hindu and Jewish in order to reassure an audience drawn by 'eastern spiritualities' or kabbalah's secrets but who do not identify with these religions. This entails reinterpreting the significance of rituals and core tenets that make traditional Hinduism and Judaism ethnic religions, deleting references to certain religious concepts and customs, introducing new practices, and engaging in endless, sometimes contradictory, interpretations. Similarly, Sufi groups that predominantly attract Euro-Americans who neither consider themselves to be Muslims nor desire to convert, promote the spiritual advancement of humanity as a whole and may cease to refer to the Qur'an, Islamic law or the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (Westerlund 2004). Thus, far from being eclectic, exotic religions become relatively similar universal meta-religions aiming at transcending religious and cultural boundaries.

There is, then, considerable coherence and homogeneity within religious bricolage. This, also because a general process of psychologisation increasingly affects religion in Euro-American societies. Despite being rooted in different

cultural contexts, Hindu, Buddhist, Kabbalistic, Shamanic or Sufi teachings are presented as a learning process towards the inner-worldly realisation of the self, which in fact reiterates the core narratives of therapy culture: the existence of the self's unexplored potential, the possibility (and the need) to develop this potential and the individual responsibility for inner change and life transformation – this voluntarism being associated with accepting life's challenges as an opportunity to learn lessons. On the model of coaching and group therapies, these teachings are transmitted as self-help techniques delivered through courses, workshops and seminars. This standardisation of religious teachings explains the facility with which social actors use many of them, successively or simultaneously. They consistently explain that they do not see any contradiction between them; indeed, many doctrinal differences and specificities have vanished through this psychologisation process.

Ultimately, despite an apparent eclecticism, bricoleurs' incursions in yoga, meditation or kabbalah contribute to a quest which is far from being volatile, unpredictable or eclectic: they consistently seek practical methods for personal growth in a 'lifelong religious learning'. Indeed, their biographical discourses emphasise the desire to realise one's self, a perception of life as a process of self-improvement, the importance of autonomy and resilience, and a sense of individual responsibility and voluntarism in the process of self-improvement. In fact, it is because neo-Hindu and kabbalistic teachings are believed to offer efficient means to achieve such aims that they are appropriated. An expressive and romantic commitment to self-realisation therefore articulates religious bricolage.

This quest of self-realisation has sometimes been misunderstood as illustrating self-authority, leading bricolage to be interpreted as evidence of individuals' emancipation from social constraints. Instead, it reflects social pressures upon individuals for permanent self-actualisation and, more largely, the increasing normalisation of the self. Students of yoga, meditation or kabbalah are strongly committed to the ideal of self-realisation, which they believe, depends on their willingness to 'work' on themselves. This work is less about freedom than the personal responsibility for one's fulfillment through making the right 'choices' – accepting the need to change, recognising and managing emotions and behaviours, eliminating 'negative' attitudes, being proactive, taking responsibilities. Moreover, through their engagement with a diversity of books, retreats, courses and rituals, one could argue that these bricoleurs reinforce the learning of a normative code of conduct that transcends specific religious teachings and therapeutic techniques. Accordingly, contemporary bricolage may not be as individual as one would think; self-realisation, while desired and voluntarily pursued by social actors, is a socially constructed incentive which posits the self as the locus of discipline and has social significance. Expecting individuals to be increasingly responsible for their wellbeing and to 'freely' pursue their personal interests, neoliberal economies and politics reward enterprising individuals who are willing to actualise themselves, who know how to manage their attitudes, and develop new skills when the situation demands it.

It is in this context that bricolage with religious resources, presented as techniques of the self, finds its social coherence rather than a fragmentation due to an infinite diversity of self-authorities.

3.3. *Bricolage and the 'old' social categories*

Finally, these case-studies show that bricolage does not generate personal, hence unique, religious patchworks because ethnicity, gender and class still affect its practice. For example, by contrast with the majority of the Kabbalah Centre's members, its Jewish students find the roots of this movement relevant to them, in reinforcing their relationship to Judaism. Disappointed by their religious upbringing, they are secularising individuals attracted by kabbalah as a mystical and Jewish alternative to mainstream congregations and communities. I also found, for instance, that religious teachings are mobilised by women in order to perform gendered roles, especially when these teachings make a connection between women's specific spiritual nature and their nurturing roles. More broadly, the emphasis on managing emotions and developing loving and caring attitudes in Siddha Yoga, the Sivananda Centres and the Kabbalah Centre resonates with their (predominantly) female members' quest for harmony in the private sphere, and the requirements of the professions they often occupy in medical, therapeutic and educational sectors.

It is the issue of class that I would like to develop in the scope of this article: the members of these movements are principally middle-class individuals, for whom being 'positive', managing one's reactions, coping with stress and developing harmonious relationships with others represent a valuable emotional capital. In fact, Illouz (2008, 198) reminds us that the ability to control emotions is constitutive of the reproduction of the middle classes, who 'achieve economic security at the price of constraining and constricting their emotions, impulses, and desires'. Bricolage with exotic religions is therefore structured by a middle-class quest for an emotional capital through techniques of the self. It also represents a way to enhance and actualise a vital cultural capital. Indeed, the bricoleurs I have met significantly belong to the 'new petite bourgeoisie' (Bourdieu 1984) – therapists, artists or those working in marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion and design; in other words, traders of symbolic goods and services who 'aestheticize' everyday life (Featherstone 1991). Their predisposition to bricolage thus reflects the importance for them to access, and control the circulation of, symbolic resources. Appropriations of mysterious and distinctive symbolic resources allow these cultural intermediaries to display competence and maintain their role in the game of cultural and symbolic struggle. Hence the constant exploration of diverse events and courses, animated by the desire to discover new, yet authentic religious teachings from those who are experts in personal growth, alternative therapies or 'spirituality'. They represent a significant proportion of the followers of the three case studies used in this article, who make use of these resources in their professional practice.

In these case studies, bricolage is a stratifying social practice, which can be viewed as 'empowering' for those who have the dispositions and entitlement to undertake it. Indeed, this appropriation to enhance one's cultural capital entails access to, and knowledge of, cultural resources, knowing what is worthy of interest and how cultural resources can be 'played' with. Practicing yoga or meditation, joining Native Americans in a sweat lodge, studying kabbalah while expressing disdain for Judaism, or presuppose a sense of entitlement, which is even more obvious when one considers the non-Jewish kabbalists, 'white gurus' and 'plastic shamans'⁶ who became authorities in the religions of others. By and large, 'the relation of ownership and entitlement for culture is central to understanding class differences' (Skeggs 2004, 158). Linking culture, self and class, Skeggs argues that the middle-classes typically optimise or 'extend' their self by appropriating and consuming culture. This is not to argue that bricolage only pertains to particular social strata; on the contrary it suggests that everybody is a bricoleur, but the norms, meanings and intents that articulate bricolage are manifold. Bricolage can express cultural resistance; but it can also be the practice of educated middle classes who can access, and feel entitled to the traditions of others while deliberately ignoring the ways in which these others live their traditions (even if these traditions, as we shall see below, are themselves the result of bricolage and invention). In any case, bricolage signifies, and makes, social distinction – like other cultural practices.

Therefore, by focusing on bricoleur's emancipation and playfulness, scholars overlook issues of resistance or domination that may still be at play in these practices, including 'who can be propertized' in this struggle for cultural resources (Skeggs, 2004, 155). Mary (1994) rightfully underlines the fact that what he calls 'postmodern collages' fundamentally differ from African and South American syncretisms, for in the latter cases the adoption of new cultural and religious elements is not free. These syncretisms were elaborated in the context of political, military and cultural domination, whereby symbolic violence, asymmetric cultural systems, cultural survival and resistance, and issues of legitimacy affected the combinations that could be made. However, the appropriation of 'exotic' religions in contemporary bricolage is not random: the appropriated beliefs and practices are rooted in traditions which, over a long period of time, have been constructed and appropriated as ancient, authentic, mysterious and vibrant alternatives to a disenchanted West. Hinduism and kabbalah – but also Sufism, Buddhism, Tantrism and Shamanism – were elaborated as absolute religious 'others', still possessing what Euro-American societies were believed to have lost. Therefore these religious resources have been constructed and disseminated on the terms of those who appropriate them, even if contemporary gurus and kabbalists instrumentalise exotic representations with subtlety and actively contribute to the making of idealised Eastern spiritualities and kabbalistic mysteries.

This romantic idealisation of particular religious traditions resulted from specific historical and cultural encounters that made *some* of them, and not

others, available (which suggests that bricolage draws on a finite pool of resources of which content can be explained). Discourses about the 'mystical East' emerged in the nineteenth century, as part of imperialist ideology and colonial practice in Asia. Europeans had no interest in popular and contemporary religious life, which was seen as a degradation of Hinduism. Instead, they were looking for its golden age, an apparently pure Hinduism to be found in the Gita and Upanishads. A romantic orientalism was looking for untouched mysticism and truths, apparently lost by a soulless modern European society. It was hoped that by studying and knowing the 'mystical East', European culture would regenerate itself through rediscovering its ancient sources (Inden 1986). These representations proved to be long lasting: those I interviewed think that 'the West has lost it' and look into yoga and meditation as sources of personal regeneration. Relations between knowledge and power are equally visible in Christian interpretations of kabbalah, which extracted it from its Jewish context as early as the Renaissance in order to confirm the truths of Christianity, and even to convert Jews. Later, leading figures of esotericism often denied kabbalah's Jewish roots, while presenting it as a pillar of esotericism, thereby reflecting Europe's ambivalent relationships with its Jewries. By and large, the ambivalent fascination for other people's supernatural powers or mysteries was not independent from the attempt to subjugate and control them. Thus, bricolage can also express the domination of others through the appropriation of their traditions and the exotic maintaining, and exploitation, of cultural differentials. Bricolage, if there is any need to repeat it, is far from being exclusively a personal matter; it actually underscores that, in many instances, culture is the sinews of war.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to discuss the use of the concept of bricolage to **apprehend the diversification of cultural styles and lifestyles, religious identities and systems**. It has done so, first by exploring this concept's initial meaning that emphasised logics and patterns, and its subsequent usages within the sociologies of culture and religion to depict, paradoxically, highly individualistic and eclectic choices in de-traditionalised societies. This article then drew on the study of unconventional religious movements and their members to show that what is currently designated as bricolage are not arbitrary patchworks in which 'anything goes'.

First, bricoleurs of religious beliefs and practices negotiate (with difficulty) with the foreignness and particularisms of what they appropriate. Second, there are therefore pre-constraints and limits in contemporary bricolage, as well coherence: the psychologisation of religion shapes and even standardises religious teachings which, whether they draw on Hinduism or kabbalah for instance, tend to become analogous techniques of personal growth, transmitted in similar settings and formats. Consequently, the eclecticism of these religious

teachings is often over-stated, as well as of their students' religious trajectory. Through incursions in yoga, meditation or kabbalah, they respond to incentives to work on one's self and hence reiterate and enhance a 'spiritual' discipline. It is current political and economic incentives that require individuals to be self-managed and autonomous through the realisation of their self, and which drives their continuous appropriation of religious and therapeutic resources. **Third, bricolage is fundamentally social rather than determined by individual psychologies, not least because gender, class and ethnicity affect who is involved in practices of bricolage, what do they do with what they appropriate and whose culture or religion they explore.** This does mean that individuals are the passive products of social structures. Indeed, **social determinism actually entails individuals' active and personal involvement: 'To be resolutely determined to commit this or that action is a common way of feeling and living the social determinisms of which we are the product'** (Lahire 2011, 206). In other words, it is through agency (choices, tastes, preferences) that social determinism manifests itself. Thus, practices of bricolage can be understood as a way for social actors to engage actively or strategically with religious traditions that have become increasingly diverse and hence less authoritative. A similar argument is made by Mellor and Shilling (2014); they argue that by acknowledging religious habitus' reflexive dimension, we can understand how religious identities and orientations allow individuals to respond or adapt to 'global modernity's complexities, diversity and contradictions. Yet, overall bricolage is neither random nor boundless for the exploration and propertisation of specific cultural resources often originates in uneven cultural encounters. The relations between power and culture therefore remain highly relevant to conceptualise bricolage, yet in envisaging a broader range of strategies: from the cultural resistance of the subaltern, to resourcing and domination through culture ownership.

It therefore seems to me that the current understandings of bricolage in the studies of popular culture and religion over-estimate its eclectic and personal nature, while overlooking the manifold social, cultural and political logics that grant it coherence. My intention was not to formulate another criticism of the de-traditionalisation thesis or of the postmodern demise of sociology. Rather, the aim of this article was to show that **bricolage is an interesting concept to think about the contemporary diversification of cultural and religious practices, provided that we reclaim its lost features: the boundaries of available resources, the pre-constraints of these resources in relation to meaning, the sociocultural logics that organise bricolage, the role played by bricolage in uneven social relations and asymmetric wider cultural flows.** In fact, we could even say that Bastide's attempt to understand the interplay between the voids of memory and bricolage in the African-American context is particularly suitable for thinking about cultural creativity in societies where tradition's authority is undermined. After all, the quest for meaning and coherence may be stronger than ever in shattered worlds.

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Notes

1. It is not possible, nor perhaps desirable to make an exhaustive review of all the publications referring in passing to bricolage: the article therefore discusses those that are most influential and illustrative. It is also beyond the scope of this article, focused on one concept, to address symbolic creativity as a whole, although some arguments specifically made here on bricolage apply to this broader issue.
2. Unfortunately translated as ‘handymen’ in the English version.
3. Many authors equate ‘bricolage’ with ‘pastiche’, revealing a lack of reflection of the actual meaning of these notions. While one may entail the combinations of diverse cultural styles, the other one designates the imitation of a particular style.
4. Except when it is applied to the making of queer identities and subcultures which challenge mainstream culture’s heteronormativity (Taylor 2012, 131).
5. The research’s methods and findings are fully developed in Altglas (2014).
6. A pejorative term first used by Native Americans, referring to those trying to pass as traditional Native American healers.

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