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RÉFÉRENCE

LAUNAY Robert. — *Savages, Romans, and Despots: Thinking about Others from Montaigne to Herder*. Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2018, 258 p., bibl., index.

- 1 Antiquity was a modern invention. Medieval thinkers, for example, knew about ancient Greeks and Romans, but did not consider them fundamentally different. In their illuminated manuscripts they idealized Greco-Roman rulers as medieval kings. It was not until the period that we now call Early Modern (16th-18th centuries) that the distinct hiatus between “antiquity” and our purportedly “modern” world emerged in European thought. At first, this was a sad contrast between a prestigious past and an inglorious present, the Renaissance perspective. Then, by the 19th century, the roles were reversed, and to thinkers like Hegel, Herder, or Lewis Henry Morgan, the past was seen as primitive savagery moving toward technologically advanced civilization, passing *en route* through a related—but different—stage of antiquity. Ancient Romans were now “Others.”
- 2 Such changes in our thinking is the topic of Northwestern University Anthropology Professor Robert Launay’s new book, a mature work which aims to situate anthropological thinking about other societies in terms of a project that is both older and broader; call this project history, or philosophy, or as he does “thinking,” explicitly inspired by Michel Foucault’s “archaeology of knowledge,” though, he assures any readers who are allergic to post-structuralism, “not necessarily by his specific analysis” (p. 7). Thinking about others, he argues, is embedded in *epistemes*: “grids of metatheoretical presuppositions” (p. 8).

- 3 This collection of essays begins with the 14th-century *Book of John Mandeville* precisely because its worldview was distinctly pre-modern, and thus provides a point of reference with which to contrast more recent and definitively Modern ones. Mandeville neither distinguished Antiquity from the present, nor Europe from elsewhere. He lived in “Christendom.” Europe was not the center of his world. Earth was a circumnavigable sphere with Jerusalem at its center and apex, a sphere in which every place had its polar opposite, or “antipode.” His antipodal contrast of north and south used the logic of Aristotle, “that opposite ends of the earth are in fundamental ways opposite in nature” (p. 24). Following Marco Polo’s travels by only 70 years, Mandeville’s journey goes from west to “the east,” an exotic far away antipode where giants and monsters live in material circumstances that are fundamentally different, under moral systems that are often bizarre (cannibalism, following Herodotus, was a common theme of cultural distinctiveness). “Mandeville seems to encompass the dual heritage of anthropology: on the one hand, travel literature describing firsthand encounters with exotic ‘others’ [...] on the other, learned disquisitions on the place of such ‘others’ within the broader scope of humankind” (p. 34).
- 4 Michel de Montaigne, an early modern thinker from the 16th century, held a radically different worldview. Discovery of the Americas meant that there was a land further west than his own, which itself was no longer conceptualized as Christendom but “Europe” (for the Reformation had ended any unitary idea of Christendom). Montaigne’s *Essays* present different customs of different peoples as purely conventional, but his relativism was original in its presentation of savages as, in some way, superior. His famous essay “On Cannibals,” reflecting on non European practices, “suggests that we, not the cannibals, are the true barbarians” (p. 46) because unlike us, they live in a state of natural equality, “where individuals are distinguished by their moral qualities and not by artificial social distinctions” (p. 47). Savages, like ancient Greeks and Romans, are set by Montaigne as “a standard by which to measure our own insufficiency” (p. 48).
- 5 “The creation of anthropology as a modern discipline,” declares Professor Launay, in a startling assertion, “was in large measure the work of lawyers,” (p. 52) who sought to develop a comparative framework within which to evaluate European institutions. He supports his claim with a chapter on Jean Bodin, whose major works on comparative legal systems adopted a relativist perspective that “different forms of government are suited to different people” (p. 55). Bodin’s original contribution to emerging cultural relativism was to see these antipodal opposites as complementary, pleading for tolerance of difference, such as in his *Colloquium of the Seven Sages*, a dialogue between proponents of different religions where scholars still disagree about which, “if any, represents Bodin’s own point of view” (p. 59).
- 6 Late 16th century travel literature of Jesuit missionaries in Asia and America, for whom the opening up of the New World and sea routes of the Far East provide some of our earliest, ethnologically informed, early modern accounts of non-Europeans, were primary sources for Enlightenment thinkers. While their Franciscan and Dominican predecessors burned Mayan manuscripts as heretical, the Jesuits adopted a “deliberate strategy to adapt their message to their audience” (p. 65). This meant learning local languages and customs, especially in China and Japan, where they needed permission of the authorities to preach. At first, Michele Ruggieri, who arrived in Macao in 1579, adopted the garb of Buddhist monks to show the religious nature of his vocation. A few

years later, Matteo Ricci adopted the costume of Confucian scholars to get the backing of imperial *literati* who looked down on Buddhists. Success was more than simply wearing the right robes. “Ricci needed to demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the written and spoken language, and of the Confucian classics” (p. 67). Jesuits depicted Confucianism as a variety of monotheistic natural religion. With its four millennia of history, studying China required revisiting their biblical chronology of time (making it longer) and reexamining the grandeur of their yardstick, the Roman Empire. By contrast, the Jesuit fathers who lived among the Huron of Quebec and who acquired a command of the local language had to translate into an entirely oral culture, which obliged them “not only to be accurate, but to be eloquent” (p. 85).

- 7 One of Launay’s more erudite chapters is on the 17th century “Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns,” which set those who argued that we degenerate moderns could never hope to excel the achievement of the ancients against those for whom the advantage was on the side of the moderns. In its attempt to define and evaluate “modern” Europe in comparative terms, this “quarrel” came to demarcate and contrast it to the “ancient” world; and also differentiated it from the non European world. Personified in the essays of Bernard de Fontenelle (modern) and William Temple (for the ancients), the debate culminated in Giambattista Vico’s famous “solution” of cyclical history where changes in human institutions are linked to changes in mental processes that are, in the end, “incommensurable in kind” (p. 112).
- 8 Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws* classified regimes into republics, monarchies, and despotisms. For republics, his main examples were drawn from antiquity. For despotisms, he used the growing body of travel journals and missionary writings from Asia. While contemporary European republics (Holland) and despotisms (Spain) were at his disposal, he did not employ them, as “spatial and temporal distance of Persia or the Roman republic allowed Montesquieu a certain degree of latitude; their apparent irrelevance to contemporary France made them safer examples to choose” (p. 141). Chinese imperial power was his disguised critique of rising Bourbon absolutism, opposed to limited European monarchy, checked in arbitrary power by his own hereditary nobility. Voltaire’s *Commentary on the Spirit of the Laws* questioned this aristocratic construct of “Oriental despotism,” reflecting his own hurt feelings about the French aristocracy, which had rejected him: “Competing visions of China reflected competing visions of French politics” (p. 143).
- 9 Rousseau’s “noble savage” set native Americans as a model against modern European society. Diderot used Tahitian “savages,” informed by the *Voyages of Bougainville* in the Pacific, to praise the cultural advantages of Polynesian sexual practices over European monogamy. For both Rousseau and Diderot “savages” were in many ways superior to Europeans; their “natural equality” was used to criticize European inequality, hypocrisy, and despotism. Scottish Enlightenment thinkers Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and John Millar, also used non-Europeans and the Ancients to construct models of liberty without order (“savagery”), and order without liberty (“despotism”). Edward Gibbon, no longer reducing ancient Rome to its republic, asked if “the catastrophe that befell the Roman Empire could be repeated in modern Europe” (p. 178).
- 10 This book, “more than twenty years in the making” (p. 221), reflects the long, slow, deliberate reading of great authors, forgotten explorers, and contemporary scholars who have shaped the concepts of “others” which have defined “ourselves” as modern

Europeans. It is a learned, highly readable volume. For college professors who therefore might be inspired in teaching a course on his archeology of anthropological knowledge, Professor Launay has also published a reader of original sources: a true *Foundations of Anthropological Theory* (2010)¹.

NOTES

1. R. LAUNAY (ed.), *Foundations of Anthropological Theory: From Classical Antiquity to Early Modern Europe*, West Sussex, Wiley-Blackwell ("Wiley Blackwell Anthologies in Social and Cultural Anthropology, 12"), 2010.