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Robert Launay, *Savages, Romans and Despots: Thinking about Others from Montaigne to Herder*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. 258 pp. \$ U.S. 97.50 ISBN 9780-226-57525-4 (cl). \$ U.S. 32.50 ISPB 978-0-226-57539-1 (pb). \$ U.S. 10-32.50 ISBN 978-226-57542-1 (e).

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From Sir John Mandeville's fourteenth-century writings to Johann Gottfried Herder's eighteenth-century account of history, *Savages, Romans and Despots* takes the reader on an intellectual journey across the centuries. The book explores how characterizations of non-Europeans figured in European debates about politics, religion, and history. In twelve carefully crafted chapters, Robert Launay invites his readers to see the world through the eyes of a variety of thinkers, mostly French, so as better to grasp how Europeans came to understand their place in the world. Launay brings his training as an anthropologist to reread familiar and less familiar authors from innovative angles to provide new insights about how Europeans understood themselves geographically, temporally, and historically.

To summarize the broad argument in Launay's own words: "non-European peoples (or, more properly, their representations) were integral features of attempts to understand and even construct European religion, European law, European politics, even European culture" (p. 215).

Three key observations drive the analysis. These observations are integral to the project of the book and its ultimate contribution. In as much as each of the individual chapters has its own value—some offering unique analysis of well-known thinkers, others situating lesser known figures in broader intellectual debates—the main contribution lies in challenging the way we understand intellectual history, and, especially, the tendency to assume the world is and always was neatly divided into “we” and “they,” “us” and “them.” While not dismissing the trope that Europeans saw the Other as exotic, and ultimately inferior, the overarching narrative of this book offers a more complex picture.[1]

First, Launay's choice of thinkers makes clear that there is not one Other, but, as the title intimates, *others*. These include temporal *others* (ancients), geographic *others* (savages and Orientals, terms that Launay employs with due diligence), political *others* (despots and monarchists) and religious *others* (non-Christians). Importantly, Launay's careful choice of authors shows there is not an inherent hierarchy of superiority and inferiority that defined European thought, as many post-colonialist scholars assume (pp. 8-9). Rather, Launay's project is indebted to what Foucault calls the “archeology of knowledge” (pp. 7-8). By engaging the

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authors on their own terms, Launay is interested in seeing what questions mattered to them, and how looking at *others* could help answer these questions. As an enterprise that problematizes the Western canon and its standard interpretations, Launay's methodology intersects with the emerging field of comparative political theory that explores how *others* view themselves and construct their notions of law, politics, religion, and culture. [2]

By beginning with a delightful discussion of Mandeville's premodern worldview and use of "exotic" *others* to criticize his own society, the book throws the reader into a world where there is not (yet) a view of ancient and modern, no conceptualization of being superior because one is European. The chapter is masterfully destabilizing. Far from the Middle Ages of the crusades where the West battles the infidels, Mandeville primes the reader to think differently.

The reader then, like Mandeville, goes on a journey across time and space as the book marches across the centuries. In the sixteenth century, the differences between Michel de Montaigne and Jean Bodin typify Launay's deft portrayal of how European thinkers turned to *others* in different ways and for different purposes.

Montaigne turns to the rediscovered ancients and newly discovered New World cannibals as alter-egos to help situate himself in "profoundly unheroic" times characterized by religious strife (p. 51). Striking a conservative chord, Montaigne, as Launay reads him, concludes that given all the difference in the world, it is best to follow one's own customs instead of trying to change them. By comparing himself to more virtuous *others*, Montaigne condemns himself to pleasant mediocrity.

Bodin, in contrast, uses geographic and religious others to try to understand the broader world. Resurrecting theories of climate found in the ancients, Bodin divides the world into temperate regions (including France and Persia, but not northern Europe) whose people are strong in mind, while those of the non-temperate (such as Scots and Patagonians) are strong in body. Launay resists reading Bodin as a determinist, instead privileging the complementarity of a "global point of view" where the strength of some peoples balances out the weaknesses of others (p. 58).

The chapter privileges a fascinating examination of a lesser-known text by Bodin: the *Colloquium*. This dialogue between sages of different religions, including a Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, Jew, Muslim, skeptic, and advocate of natural religion, is striking given that it was written during the period of French religious wars. For Bodin, they represent a group of *others* whose views taken as a collective form the highest level of harmony even if, as Launay points out, atheists and witches were ultimately excluded from this harmony.

Characteristic of Launay's analysis, there is no attempt to sugarcoat Bodin (or anyone for that matter) by making him into some archetype of exemplarity. Rather than exemplarity, Launay recognizes that the ways Europeans understood *others* were, just like European societies at the time, often characterized by discord and debate.

This brings me to the second observation. Europeans instrumentalized portraits of *others* to buttress arguments about their own political, social, and religious concerns. Just as Launay stresses there are *others* in the plural, he also emphasizes that there was no monolithic European view. Rather, his choice of thinkers showcases difference and discord by placing their

ideas in the context of key political and intellectual debates to which their ideas contributed. His discussion of Bernard de Fontenelle and William Temple's participation in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns is one such example. More compelling and gripping is the use of *others* to engage debates about absolute monarchy that crisscross the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Parallel portraits of Jesuit missionary reports from China and North America showcase how encounters with two distinct *others* informed European views of good government.

In the most tantalizing chapters of the book, Launay traces the impact of seventeenth century Jesuit accounts of *others* through the Enlightenment. To extract one thread from Launay's complex argument, Louis Lecompte's account of China (1696), written in the reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715), was driven by his own political agenda. If China generally compared favorably with Europe, it was to support the Jesuit cause in the controversy that raged in France about which religious group was best suited to convert them. Lecompte's book would gain in notoriety in the coming century. Those who admired the reign of Louis XIV such as Voltaire, would view China in similar ways. And yet, as Launay's discussion of Montesquieu shows, a negative view of China could be instrumentalized to serve a different political agenda. In short, Launay's analysis shows how an early Jesuit account that served a sixteenth century political agenda sowed the seeds for utopian and dystopian views of China that were instrumentalized in Enlightenment debates about absolute monarchy, republicanism, and despotism.

Launay tells an equally compelling story in the context of North America. Early seventeenth century Jesuit narratives of setbacks and triumphs were a "rich source of information" about the *others* they encountered, but also narratives "carefully crafted as a means of conveying impressions which fostered the Jesuits' long-term aims" (p. 85). The discussion of Paul Le Jeune's 1633 travels with a band of Montagnais hunters in New France introduces the reader to local customs, while the dialogue between Le Jeune and the figure of the Sorcerer sheds light on the interplay between cultures. The interchange is symbolic of the complexity Launay's book conveys: Both Le Jeune and the Sorcerer make judgments about each other as *other*. The written record of their encounter would inspire later writers, including Louis-Armond, Baron de Lahontan, who would use the Jesuits' relations as sources of information for his own purposes.

Lahontan is the starting point for a discussion about how *others* as savages were used in the Enlightenment as a foil to critique European civilization. Conceptions of religion, property relations, and sexuality are represented through the eyes and bodies of literary savages. This marks a critical shift in how others were used: "Whatever real differences exist in the ways in which Lahontan, Rousseau, and Diderot portray 'savages', all of them make savages into representatives of a 'natural' humanity in stark opposition to Europeans. In this way, the contrast between 'savages' and Europeans operates in an idiom radically different from the contrast between "Orientals" and Europeans" (pp. 165-66).

As a final observation, Launay embraces complexity and divergences rather than seeking to force a teleological view onto the historical narrative. *Savages, Romans and Despots* tells multiple stories that ultimately end with "divergent rather than convergent views" (p. 220). In France, savagery and despotism, East and West, tended to be invoked in "different contexts and to

bolster or undermine different arguments” (p. 170). In Britain and Germany, however, they were combined into a single vision.

Launay turns to Adam Ferguson, John Millar, and Edward Gibbon to argue that the British “were the first to develop a sophisticated, sociologically acute, and developmental account of the emergence of hierarchy in world-historical terms” (p. 185). They did so by looking at *others* through the lens of their own political challenges, namely the threat of despotism. Looking at *others* was a way to understand how “civilization” was a special combination of liberty and order, in contrast to savagery (liberty without order) and despotism (order without liberty). If there is a hint of European superiority shining through the discourses, its purpose was rooted in local political concerns: preventing Britain from changing in the wrong direction.

A fascinating discussion of Herder concludes the over-arching narrative of the book. Rather than the common vision of European superiority over *others* often associated with the imperial Enlightenment, Launay’s account of Herder reminds the reader that non-Europeans were also critical to European debates about their own national identity. Rather than a broader vision of European or Western identity, the reader is left with the somewhat contradictory vision of a thinker who is heralded as the “ancestor both of German nationalism and of cultural relativism” (209).

The chapter on Herder is a fitting bookend to the purposefully disjointed story of European *others* that began with Mandeville. French attempts to make sense of their own political and religious realities, which employed parallel accounts of savage and Oriental *others*, were synthesized by the British into one theory of progress and potential corruption and decay, which was in turn rejected by the Germans.

As rich and persuasive as *Savages, Romans and Despots* is, I want to suggest three alternative narratives about Europe’s *others*. Each begins with Montaigne, who features in the title, but whose place in the overarching narrative is underemphasized as the book unfolds.

First is the idea of viewing Montaigne as one among Launay’s *others*. Like the ancients, whose identity gains new meaning when juxtaposed with that of moderns, so too does Montaigne find a new identity when viewed as being from a temporally different era. In the eighteenth century, he garnered the reputation of being a sage philosopher, even a moralist, who offered insight from the dark times of the French civil wars.<sup>[3]</sup> My point is that, at least insofar as France is concerned, there is something to be gained by looking at philosophical thought produced in the midst of the religious wars as an example of the French Enlightenment’s *others*. Just as the ancients were different from the moderns and instrumentalized for specific agendas, so too was Montaigne.

A second alternative narrative would engage more deeply the broader imperial threads present in Europe’s engagement with *others*. Montaigne’s essay on the cannibals of Brazil is one instance in which the author of the *Essais* turns to the New World to reflect on French society and his own place within it. His thoughts on the Spanish conquest of the Incas and Aztecs is another. Engaging the latter would lead the reader into debates about empire, and in particular, critiques of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Montaigne was a purported Catholic, living among clashing Protestants, and arguing for greater religious tolerance. His critique of the imperial inclinations of Catholic Spain has political meaning. If one traces the critique of

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Spain's imperial conquests across the centuries, one finds more of the complexity that Launay likes to expose.

The "Black Legend"—a Protestant inspired critique of Spanish cruelty in the New World—was a prime example of how European depictions of *others* [in this case, savages as victims] were instrumentalized for European political and religious agendas. Among Launay's studied authors, deeper engagement with Voltaire would lead the reader to confront a more problematic picture of how *others* were instrumentalized for political and philosophical purposes. Instead of Voltaire's view on China, an analysis of his views of the New World situates New World *others* in more Eurocentric conversations. Thus, his popular play *Alzire, ou les Américains* tells an alternative version of how the Spanish conquest of the Americas could have unfolded. Instead of war, the play is a story of hope and progress, a tale of Enlightenment Europe persuading *others* to assimilate to Enlightenment values.[4]

A final narrative would trace Montaigne's view of savage *others* to the quarrel between Rousseau and Voltaire in the eighteenth century. This was a debate about the nature of man, the potential of European civilization, and ultimately the inclusivity of the Enlightenment theory of human progress. Rousseau used imagined *others* to critique European corruption. Voltaire turned to histories and travelers' accounts to defend the potential of some *others* to eventually become Enlightened, his view of black Africans a notable exception.

The debate takes a darker turn with Cornelius de Pauw, a typical Encyclopedist schooled in climate theory and the Enlightenment ideals of reason, science, and progress. Interestingly, De Pauw combines descriptions of savages and Orientals to challenge both Rousseau's critique of civilization and Voltaire's faith in the progress thesis. Rejecting the optimistic views of *others* penned by the Jesuit travelers to China and New France, De Pauw published two books whose purpose was to describe scientifically the state of mankind. Notwithstanding his objectionable science, the disturbing conclusions he draws defend the Enlightenment at the expense of these *others*. In his *Recherches philosophiques sur les Egyptiens et les Chinois*, De Pauw condemns the despotic Chinese to eternal mediocrity, while in his *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, he condemns the American savages to extermination.[5]

Examining this narrative exposes the way *others* figured in European debates about the contours of civilization. The stakes were not merely philosophical, for the answers shaped broader political attitudes regarding European civilization and its global reach, helping to determine which *others* were included and which *others* were excluded.[6]

Ultimately, these critiques play into the power of Launay's over-arching argument by bringing additional layers of complexity to light. By employing the thesis of *Savages, Romans and Despots*—that Europeans instrumentalized their views of *others* to navigate their own problems—to other writers, the reader will no doubt uncover additional narratives to add to our understanding of how Europeans understood and constructed European identity.

## NOTES

[1] Vanita Seth, *Europe's Indians: Producing Racial Difference, 1500-1900* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

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[2] Farah Godrij, "Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought: The Hermeneutics of Interpreting the Other," *Polity* 41, 2 (2009): 135-165.

[3] Daniel Brunstetter, "Benjamin Franklin's Three Montaignes: The *Essays*, the *Éloges*, the Man", *Montaigne Studies* XXXI (2019): 9-24; pp. 19-20.

[4] Daniel Brunstetter, *Tensions of Modernity: Las Casas and His Legacy in the French Enlightenment* (New York: Routledge, 2012); pp. 104-13.

[5] Brunstetter, *Tensions of Modernity*; pp. 113-33.

[6] J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion: Barbarians, Savages, and Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); p. 225.

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