
H-France Review Vol. 20 (February 2020), No. 45

Françoise Le Borgne, Odile Parsis-Barubé, and Nathalie Vuillemin, eds., *Les Savoirs des barbares, des primitifs, et des sauvages: Lectures de l'Autre au XVIIIe et XIXe siècles*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2018. 329 pp. 37.00€. (pb). Notes and bibliography. ISBN 978-2-406-07939-2.

Review by David Allen Harvey, New College of Florida.

This volume, consisting of sixteen essays by scholars of early modern French intellectual and cultural history (based primarily in France, but also including contributors working in Belgium, Switzerland, and the United States), seeks to explore the range of representations of the Other by French authors, artists, and learned travelers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The contributions are divided across a number of categories, including linguistic and semantic definitions of concepts, forms and practices of knowledge, the construction of historical knowledge, and literary and artistic representations. Each essay has its own footnotes, and there is a (somewhat brief) common bibliography, making this a useful reference tool.

As suggested by the volume's title, several of the essays argue that the Other was not a single monolithic category for Enlightenment-era French writers, and that the concepts of barbarians, savages, and primitives, even if sometimes overlapping, had distinct origins and resonances. The oldest of these concepts, the barbarian, derived from classical Greece, and referred originally to any of the neighboring peoples (Persians, Scyths, etc.) who spoke different languages and had different cultures. Subsequently, it was used to refer to the Germanic tribes who overran the Roman Empire, and still later, to the culturally different civilizations of the Orient encountered by medieval and early modern Europeans. While the term had pejorative connotations from the beginning and often suggested notions of cruelty, brutality, and destruction, barbarism was not incompatible with advanced forms of social organization. In fact, some stadial theories of development would later present barbarism as an intermediate category between savagery and civilization, or conversely, as a decadent state to which civilized societies could regress. The term "savage" originally existed as an adjective, meaning wild, uncultivated, or literally "of the forest," and described plant and animal life untamed by the hand of man. Following the discovery of America, however, the savage became a noun used to refer to its inhabitants, who (or so it seemed to early European explorers and missionaries) lived in a state of pure Nature, without laws, morals, or social structures. Savages of this sort could be either noble or ignoble, and many European observers, from Montaigne to Lahontan to Rousseau, used the figure of the savage to highlight the artificiality and absurdity of many European customs and practices. The idea of the primitive, the most modern of the three terms, came into frequent use in the eighteenth century in tandem with a progressive, developmentalist understanding of the historical process (i.e., as the original state of mankind prior to the rise of civilization), and as such (unlike either

the barbarian or the savage) the concept of the primitive involved a sort of infantilization of the peoples in question, who were seen as representing the childhood of humanity. At the same time, however, as the essay by Anne-Marie Mercier-Faivre about Antoine Court de Gebelin argues, an alternate, somewhat contradictory usage of the concept of primitive emerged out of Christian apologetics and Renaissance Hermeticism, which used it to contrast modern decadence with the supposedly pristine original state of human society and institutions (as with the primitive church of the first apostles, or the *prisca theologica* from which world religions were held to have degenerated).

In practice, the information and arguments presented in the essays in this volume indicate that French reflections on Others were messier and more multivalent than this tripartite division suggests. For example, Samuel Thévoz's essay on Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment representations of Tibet and its inhabitants argues that French observers were puzzled by the apparent paradox between the material backwardness and poverty of the Tibetans (explainable in terms of Enlightened social theory by the harshness of the environment in which they lived) and their abstract and refined religious sensibility and the purity of the morals derived from their religion. Hélène Cussac's discussion of European representations of African dance reflects similar ambivalence, for even as most outside observers condemned the lascivious character of African dance, some of them also recognized the degree of coordination, inventiveness, and skill that went into it, and commented on parallels to European dances. Finally, in her discussion of the role of the Frankish myth in the legitimation of the French monarchy, Agnès Graceffa discusses how political changes in France, from the age of Louis XIV to the Enlightenment, Revolution, and Restoration, led to dramatic shifts in the historical reputation of the Germanic tribes who invaded and conquered Roman Gaul in the early medieval era. Partisans of the monarchy were forced to defend its barbaric remote ancestors, the comte de Boulainvilliers used the legend of Frankish conquest to justify the privileges of the nobility, while the abbé Siéyès used the same logic to argue that the second estate was not an integral part of the French nation. While the nature of the ancient Franks had not changed, the way they were perceived by contemporary Frenchmen shifted considerably over the long eighteenth century, perhaps the clearest case in this volume of how historical representations were mobilized and modified to meet the political demands of the present.

As these examples suggest, discourses about the Other are often, in fact, discourses about the Self, and many of these exotic Others were "good for thinking" (to borrow a phrase from Robert Darnton) about social and political issues of great relevance. In some cases, as with Montaigne, Montesquieu, and Diderot, they provided conceptual foils for critiquing one's own society through the device of the naïve outside observer, as I observed in my study, *The French Enlightenment and Its Others*.^[1] With the advent of the social sciences and of stadial theories of societal development, the presence of primitive peoples in distant lands allowed European observers a living representation of how their own remote ancestors had once lived. As Jan Blanc notes in his contribution to this volume, in the late seventeenth century, the French dramatist Racine justified his transposition of classical tragedy from the ancient Greco-Roman world to the contemporary Ottoman Empire by likening distances in space to distances in time. Similarly, as P. J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams observed in an influential study of the reception of travel narratives in the eighteenth century, the British statesman Edmund Burke wrote that the careful observations of philosophical travelers (forerunners of modern anthropologists) had begun to fill in "the great map of mankind," and the Société des Observateurs de l'Homme, a short-lived learned society founded under the Directory that is discussed in the essay by co-editor Nathalie

Vuillemin, was founded upon this assumption. As Rousseau famously argued in a footnote to the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, contemporary European knowledge of man and society would necessarily remain partial and parochial as long as vast parts of the globe and its inhabitants remained unknown to Western scholars. For Rousseau, as for many of his contemporaries, thorough empirical study of the diversity of the human experience across time and space was a necessary precondition for better knowledge of humanity as a whole.

The volume contains a brief introduction by the three editors introducing some of the key themes that run throughout the essays that follow, but does not contain a conclusion. To some degree, this reflects the heterogenous character of the collection, as the essays branch off in a variety of directions, reflecting the interests and current research of each author. Some of the articles presented here engage more broadly and explicitly with the framing themes presented by the editors in their introductions, while others are more narrowly focused case studies. In the opinion of this reviewer, the volume would have been strengthened by an analytical conclusion that assessed the contribution of each essay and brought together some common themes that emerged from them. Another minor critique is that, while the *bibliographie selective* is not meant to be comprehensive and does present a fairly broad range of Francophone scholarship relevant to the contents of the volume, it almost completely ignores the very extensive body of Anglophone literature that has been written on these topics over the past half-century or so (Patrick Geary's *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* is the only work originally published in English to appear [2]). For a volume dedicated to the study of French intellectual engagement with the Other, this is an ironic omission, and one that unnecessarily limits the horizons of its contributors.

These quibbles aside, this volume makes a solid contribution to the field, and should form part of any research collection. I would particularly recommend it as an overview of the state of the field for graduate students or established scholars pursuing a new research direction on representations of the Other in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment France.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Françoise Le Borgne, Odile Parsis-Barubé, and Nathalie Vuillemin, "Introduction"

Agnès Steuckardt, "*Barbare et sauvage* dans les grands dictionnaires de langue française (1680-1798)"

Véronique Magri-Mourgues, "*Barbare, primitive, sauvage* en contexte littéraire dans le roman, la poésie, et le récit de voyage entre 1800 et 1900"

Nathalie Vuillemin, "Comment les récits fondateurs amérindiens déconstruisent le savoir européen"

Françoise Le Borgne, "Les savoirs des barbares et des sauvages dans l'*Encyclopédie*. Du rejet polémique à l'intégration dans une odyssée de l'esprit humain"

Hélène Cussac, "La danse des Africains dans des récits de voyages européens du XVIIIe siècle. Circulation, transmission et représentation d'un savoir artistique"

Anne-Marie Mercier-Faivre, “Le *Monde primitif* (1773-1782) de Court de Gébelin. A la recherche des savoirs perdus”

Samuel Thévoz, “Derrière moi une horde de Tibétains sauvages et magnifiques.’ Des barbares traîtres à la civilisation?”

Jean Ehrard, “Savoirs sauvages, savoirs barbares selon *L’Esprit des lois* de Montesquieu”

Odile Parris-Barubé, “Relectures antiquaires de la primitivité. Le programme des fondateurs de l’Académie celtique (1804-1805)”

Guy Barthèlemey, “Un chaos de bonnes et de mauvaises qualités.’ Que faire des Bédouins?”

François Guillet, “Des Normands aux Vikings. Une culture ‘barbare’ au coeur de la France”

Agnès Graceffa, “Liberté, égalité, fraternité barbares, ou les impossibles fondements francs de la devise républicain”

Jan Blanc, “Réforme ou revolution? Problèmes et solutions primitivistes dans l’art britannique du XVIIIe siècle”

Josiane Guitard-Morel, “Bernardin de Saint-Pierre et le peuple noir. Reconnaissance, appropriation, et transposition”

Claudine-Anne Giacchetti, “Savoir des sauvages dans deux romans de la comtesse de Ségur”

Catherine Breniquet, “L’invention de la filature et du tissage par Emile Bayard pour *L’Homme primitive* (1870) de Louis Figuier”

NOTES

[1] David Allen Harvey, *The French Enlightenment and Its Others: The Mandarin, the Savage and the Invention of the Human Sciences* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[2] Patrick Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

David Allen Harvey
New College of Florida
धारवेय@ncf.edu

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of

H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172