

AN EXPANDING WORLD
The European Impact on World History, 1450–1800

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An Expanding World
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Volume 31: Part I

Facing Each Other

The World's Perception of Europe
and Europe's Perception of the World

edited by
Anthony Pagden

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Introduction

Anthony Pagden

The European perception of the world and peoples beyond Europe, and the images which those peoples received of the Europeans, have become in recent years the subject of intense scholarly interest and heated debate both in and outside the academy. Most of the world has in one way or another been marked by European colonization. Large areas of it have at one time or another in their histories been occupied by European colonizers. And even those which have not, such as China, have frequently been invaded by European merchants and missionaries with often thinly-veiled colonizing ambitions. This prolonged contact between Europe and what has come to be called its 'others' inevitably resulted in an extensive literature, part descriptive, part fantastical. It is a literature which goes back to (at least) Herodotus in the fifth century BCE, the first known European to travel well beyond the boundaries of his own community and to marvel at and write about what he found there. Herodotus was unusual in the range of his travels and in the fact that he wrote so extensively about them. But the Greeks were, in their own terms, 'extreme voyagers' (*poluplanês*), like Pythagoras – who, since he could recall all his past lives, travelled also in time – who was born in Samos, visited Egypt, dwelt in Crete, and lived amongst the Chaldeans before finally settling in Croton; or Hecate of Miletus who visited Egypt before Herodotus. And it is Solon who is said to have been the first to have made the connection – which was to have a long history in European thought – between travel (*planê*) and wisdom (*sophia*). True, the regions across which these men travelled were necessarily restricted by modern standards, and the peoples at whose customs and practices Herodotus marvels were far closer to him than any of his descendants would find themselves to, say, a Huron of Canada or the inhabitants of the Sandwich Islands. But it was the Greeks and their heirs who established what was to become an enduring European cultural stereotype: that of the wanderer, the pilgrim, the *homo viator* in St Francis' phrase, the man (and before the late-eighteenth century they were always men), the individual who provided a link however tenuous, with the world beyond.

Greek inclination to travel (and where possible to colonize) and Greek curiosity were inherited and developed by the Romans, who transformed a small, essentially military community into a vast and complex imperial system, which, at its height under the Emperor Trajan stretched from Scotland to the Sahara, and from the Atlantic to the Euphrates. And, in particular during the second century CE, when the Empire was relatively stable and the roads safe, travel which combined antiquarian and ethnographic interests become frequent across these vast distances. After the collapse of the Empire, however, and the gradual shrinking,

both literally and intellectually, of the frontiers of what had by then come to be described as 'Europe', a knowledge and understanding of the worlds beyond Europe, in particular those located in what was variously described as 'Ethiopia' or 'India', dwindled to gossip and fable. European geography in the early Middle Ages was, as Jacques Le Goff explains in chapter 1, severely limited before the rediscovery of Ptolemy in 1406. The Indian Ocean in particular was, as so many areas beyond the limits of cartography, a realm of the imagination – what Le Goff calls an 'Oneiric Horizon', a place which became 'a mental horizon, the exotic fantasy of the medieval West', a place where its dreams 'freed themselves from repression' (chapter 1, p. 7). The Indian Ocean was a paradigmatic case but it belonged to a category of such locations where fantasies of predominantly sexual and political freedom could be safely enacted, locations where, to cite Le Goff again, 'The dream expanded to a vision of a world where a different kind of life was lived, where taboos were eliminated or exchanged for others' (chapter 1, p. 9).

The 'Golden Age' which in antiquity had been a period in the collective history of mankind, also now became a place. Amerigo Vespucci's tales of women who lived to be over a hundred and whose bodies remained unmarked by childbearing, the Milanese Peter Martyr's bucolic descriptions of the inhabitants of the Antilles in 1530, Antoine de Bougainville's description of the island of Tahiti in 1768, were all in their very different ways attempts to reposition the 'Oneiric Horizon' of the European geographical imagination, first in the Caribbean and America, then in the Pacific. A horizon, furthermore, could be made to recede almost to infinity (see chapter 22). What failed to turn up in Africa or 'Ethiopia' could surely be found in 'India', or after 1492 in America, or after the 1760s in the Pacific. In 1512 Juan Ponce de León went to Florida in search of the fountain of eternal youth and Francisco de Orellana was so convincing in his description of the Amazons that their name, not his, was given to the great river he was the first to navigate.

The peoples who inhabited such places, however, when they did not belong to an impossible natural history, tended to be described in terms of relatively simple categories. As W.R. Jones explains in chapter 2, medieval scholars in Europe, 'never succeeded in fashioning a general theory of cultural development comparable to the work of Ibn Khaldun or a handful of great Moslem and Chinese scholars' (p. 40). Most non-Europeans and non-Christians tended to be described in terms of the ancient Greek distinction between the Greek and the 'barbarian'. Too much has been made of this as far as the Ancient World is concerned: the Greek/barbarian distinction was never so rigid as later commentators from Albertus Magnus to Immanuel Kant have supposed it to be. But until the whole procedure of classification by cultural behaviour came into question in the eighteenth century, the attribution of general characteristics to all those who are not 'us' was a useful and, given the relative homogeneity of

European life, a compelling one. For the Christians of the Middle Ages in particular, 'barbarians' could be characterized in terms of a number of antitheses to the supposed features of civil society. Whereas Christians lived in harmony and concord with one another – or at least in situations of carefully regulated violence – and governed their lives according to an established code of law, the *barbari* spent all their days in ceaseless aggression, ignorant of laws, and generally negligent of the natural divisions between men and women, young and old.

As Europeans moved further and further afield, however, so both the scope of their perceptions and the level of their expectations changed. The earliest European contacts with non-Europeans in the early-modern period were with Africa. Africa was, of course, one of the original three continents into which the ancient geographers had divided the world. But before the Portuguese in the early-fifteenth century began to sail down the west coast, sub-Saharan Africa had been a place as filled with liberating fantasies as the Indian Ocean, a place of monsters and dragons; of 'Prester John', a Christian monarch of untold wealth; of 'Mountains of the Moon'; of Gog and Magog. It was also, more prosaically, known to be the source of much of the gold which came, via Arab traders, into late-medieval Europe. The early Portuguese encounter with the kingdoms of West Africa, as described here by Peter Russell, in chapter 19, demonstrated all the uncertainty of the initial response to a world whose features were as yet wholly indistinct. With time the Europeans would come to look upon black Africans as nothing more than 'savages' to be despised, enslaved or employed to enslave their neighbours. But in these early years, the restraints imposed by the formalities of European diplomacy – together with the Africans' unforeseen ability to defend themselves effectively – resulted in the insistence that all the laws which applied between sovereign European states also applied between European and African ones. In Russell's story of the Wolof prince Bemoin, the first and only African king to visit his 'sovereign' in Portugal, we can see the consequences of an 'encounter' not merely between white kings and black ones, but between two conflicting European perceptions of the 'other'. It tells us, however, very little about what Bemoin thought of John II. Before the twentieth century and the rise of modern anthropology we can get only partial glimpses, always difficult to interpret, of what the Africans or the Pacific islanders made of the Europeans. This is not, of course, because they did not have an opinion about them, but because these were cultures which were wholly oral. Their histories, when they were written at all, were written by Europeans, and as Wyatt MacGaffey points out, such histories tended to be overwhelmingly concerned with the European presence in Africa. As with all those places that were 'discovered', the Africans were considered to have no history before the arrival of the white men, if only because history was conceived as a self-reflective narrative of progress. In that understanding of what constitutes history, it is the case that 'Africans were

introduced into history by the creation in their midst of centralized, rational, document-gathering colonial governments' (chapter 21, p. 545). It was also the case that, for most Europeans, the African remained an unchanging specimen of a certain kind of 'primitive' from the mid-fifteenth until the late-nineteenth century. The American Indians, the Pacific islanders, the inhabitants of Asia and of the steppes, all came to be described in ways which were increasingly complex, increasingly true to some perceived ethnographic standard, just as they were also pressed into service as exempla of the different scales of historical evolution from the 'savage', through the 'barbarian' to the 'civil'. The black African, by contrast, remained locked in a timeless void whose occupants, as Mary Louise Pratt observes (commenting on John Burrow's *Account of Travels into the Interior and Southern Africa in the years 1797 and 1798*), constituted a 'familiar, widespread and stable "other"'. The people to be othered are homogenized into a collective "they" which is distilled even further into an iconic "he" (the standard male specimen)' (chapter 20 p. 518).

This 'homogenization' and the accompanying absence of any kind of indigenous voice which might serve to correct it is, of course, even more acute in those regions where European colonization has resulted in the virtual disappearance of the indigenous inhabitants. The Caribbean became, almost immediately after Columbus' first voyage, a place largely constructed by Columbus himself to suit the demands of his own 'Oneiric Horizon', a place inhabited by the fierce man-eating 'Cannibals' – a corruption of the term Carib – and the gentle (and frequently eaten) Taino Arawaks.¹ The circum-Caribbean tribes had no written script and in the islands they perished too fast, through either depredation or disease, to be the subject of the kind of quasi-ethnographical inquires which have, fortuitously, preserved so much of the pre-contact history of the peoples of the mainland. The few 'Caribs' who now remain on the island of Dominica, after centuries of displacement by one European power after another, have almost no cultural or ethnic link to what their ancestors once were. Caribbean history has become largely the history of those, the Africans and their descendants, who were imported into the region by the European settlers. It is, indeed, a very hard history to have to – in Jalil Sued-Badillo's words – 'face up to' (chapter 17).

As the extent of the world with which Europeans were familiar expanded during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, so there came a shift in the older categories and long-unexamined perceptions, generally nourished on medieval travel literature (often by those like John de Mandeville who had never travelled at all), aimed at a market for exotic, and where possible erotic, entertainment. The Renaissance

¹ See Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters. Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (London and New York, 1986), pp. 13–87.

traveller, as Joan-Pau Rubiés has shown in chapter 4, pursued a far wider range of objectives than his medieval predecessor. For him travel became a replacement for the pilgrimage and the crusade, and like the crusade it could not easily be separated from the quest for empire, nor, like the pilgrimage, from the search for wisdom.²

This 'new' traveller did not, however, cease his quest for the strange and the miraculous. Those in particular who went to the more remote, more dangerous parts of the globe rarely returned empty-handed. The materials they brought home with them, randomly chosen, and detached from any context which might have given them some local meaning, went to make up the *Kunst- or Wunderkammer*, the 'cabinet of curios', many of which came to form the basis of modern museum collections. Most 'curios' were cultural artefacts, evidence of how 'primitive' peoples managed their lives, worshipped their gods, decorated their homes or waged their wars. But not all. Some were live specimens. The habit of bringing back men and women, generally for the purpose of using them on later voyages as interpreters, had begun with the early Portuguese voyages to Africa. Columbus returned from his first voyages with a number of Arawak who were paraded before Ferdinand and Isabel, as evidence of the possible value of the inhabitants of the islands he had discovered. Such unfortunates were evidence, at least, of the success of costly, precarious and frequently fruitless ventures. Looking directly on the face of the 'other' was also far more rewarding than merely gazing at whatever bric-à-brac the explorer had been able to buy or steal. In chapter 7, Steven Mullaney tells the tale of the 'Eskimoes' with whom Martin Frobisher returned from Baffin island in 1577, 'as a token from thence of his being there', who could be observed, during their brief lives (they only survived for a year), in a skin-covered boat hunting the royal swans on the Thames.³ Even more elaborate and, because it promoted Montaigne to write his celebrated essay 'On Cannibals', somewhat more significant, was the 'Brazilian' village constructed outside Rouen in 1550 and 'stocked' with over fifty Amerindians specially imported for the occasion (chapter 7, pp. 189–90). These were the earliest instances of the 'other' visiting Europe, a subject which was to become a topos in the eighteenth century. In Rouen Montaigne was able to give voice to these visiting Tupinamba, even if what they say sounds more like the detached irony of the French sceptic than anything an American Indian might have uttered. Yet for all the obvious fabrication behind these exchanges they are one of the earliest instances of a true 'encounter' between the European and an 'other'.

² See also, Jás Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés, 'Introduction', Jás Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés, eds., *Voyages and Visions: Towards a Cultural History of Travel* (London, 1999), pp. 1–56.

³ This episode has been brilliantly analysed by Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 109–18.

Montaigne, of course, never went to Brazil. But like many of his class he travelled extensively in Europe, and left detailed accounts of his experience. Travel became a central part of the humanist educational programme. Writers like Nathan Chytraeus, Theodor Zwinger and Hieronymus Turler devised manuals to help the aspiring traveller gather and collect useful information on the places he visited, as Justin Stagl explains in chapter 5. Travel quite literally broadened the mind. And with the 'discovery' of America, the possibilities which the new – new at least to Europeans – continent provided, in human and natural history, now seemed boundless. As Alexander von Humboldt, in what remains the most compelling account of the intellectual significance of the 'discoveries', observed:

It is the property of discoveries that as they touch upon the collected interests of society, they increase both the circle of conquests and the terrain left to conquer. Feeble souls believe that at each epoch humanity has reached the culminating point of its march forwards. They forget that as they advance, so the field left to cover reveals itself to be still greater, bounded by a horizon that recedes without end.⁴

'Discovery' and the process of discovering became a key element in the construction of a new identity for Europeans in the Renaissance. 'Discovery' derives from the late Latin term *disco-operio*, meaning to 'uncover', 'reveal to the gaze'. It was always implicit that those who had been 'discovered', the peoples of America, Africa or the Pacific, could have no meaningful prior existence before they had been thus brought into history, a history which was as much determined by the Christian cycle of redemption as it was by the secular Graeco-Roman narrative of social and technological evolution.

Humboldt's horizon, therefore, would only cease to recede once the whole globe had been mapped, settled and known. But although Humboldt saw the process of discovery as continuous from the Middle Ages until the sixteenth century, he also identified, as many had done before him, the discovery of America as a turning point in the European encounter with its 'others'. For both Humboldt and his near contemporary, the French historian Jules Michelet, the unforeseen appearance of America in the mental universe of fifteenth-century Europeans constituted a formative stage in what Humboldt called 'the progress of all nations towards the attainment of an elevated mind and system of morality'.⁵ For Michelet it represented the culminating moment in the process which he described as the 'discovery of the world and the discovery of man'.⁶ This discovery, as John Elliott points out (chapter 6), was more extensive than the discovery of a new race of the non-European. It was the discovery of an

⁴ *Examen critique de l'histoire de la géographie* 5 vols. (Paris, 1836–9), II, pp. 354–5.

⁵ *Examen critique de l'histoire de la géographie* I, p. ix.

⁶ *Histoire de la France au seizième siècle* (Paris, 1855), pp. ii–iii.

unknown continent and with it the recognition that the ancient geographers who had divided the globe into three had been mistaken. And, as Erasmus remarks, if the ancients had been wrong on this point, might they not also be wrong on others?⁷ In this it seemed that not merely geography was at stake, but the entire foundations of western science in an authoritative canon of texts.

If the existence of America constituted a threat to any kind of ancient knowledge, its peoples also provided images of peoples who were more radically unlike those of Europe, in appearance, customs and beliefs, than anything to be found on the more familiar terrain of Africa or Asia. For Europeans explaining such high levels of difference, while still retaining some notion of a single human nature, became increasingly difficult, if what was understood by 'nature' was broadly similar patterns of behaviour. If some races ate one another, sacrificed one another, failed to observe the required restrictions between kin when choosing their sexual partners, appeared to recognise no deities, had no perceptions of time, spoke different languages when addressing men and women, could they still be said to belong to the same genus as those who did none of these things? Such stark dissimilarities raised, as the French sceptics of the sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne, Pierre Charron and Pierre Bayle reiterated in a number of different idioms, ultimately unanswerable questions about the possibility of any kind of human knowledge. Faced with such overwhelming variety, there simply could be no natural law, no certainty about what is 'good' and what 'evil' – beyond the most minimal supposition that all humans wish to avoid pain and, where possible, maximise their chances for pleasure. Beyond that, all those who in John Locke's words had 'look'd abroad beyond the Smoak of their own Chimneys' could not fail to come to the conclusion that 'these names *Vertue* and *Vice*, in the particular instances of their application, through the several Nations and Societies of Men in the World, are constantly attributed only to such actions, as in each Country and Society are in reputation or discredit'. Judgement in such matters could only be 'the Consent of Private men'.⁸ It was custom which made some men turn their backs as a sign of greeting while others raised their hats, or some men bury their dead as a mark of respect, while others ate theirs.⁹ It was custom, observed Descartes which made the clothing we had so admired one year seem absurd and degrading the next. As John Elliott concludes, the experience of the variety of human kind with which America had presented the intellectual élite of Europe, 'drove some of them at least to widen and deepen their concept of man, and to

⁷ Quoted in Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven and London, 1993), p. 89.

⁸ *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), pp. 66, 353, 356.

⁹ The examples are Montaigne's 'De la coustume et de ne changer aisement une loy receüe', *Essais*, ed. Albert Thibaudet (Paris, 1961), pp. 143–4.

draw upon Europe's inherited historical and geographical traditions in order to understand better the peoples entrusted to their charge. In the process of inquiry, they found themselves led irresistibly towards an acknowledgement of the simultaneous unity and diversity of the human race' (chapter 6, p. 183). The 'they' he is discussing here were colonial officials and missionaries of the sixteenth-century Spanish Empire, but Elliot's conclusions would hold for most Europeans in most parts of the Americas in the early years of contact.

'Unity of the human race' did not, however, imply equality. American Indians were, for all but a few Europeans, unquestionably human, and as humans they possessed certain inalienable rights. But they also lived, in Thomas Hobbes' description, in the 'time of Warre', or, as others would describe it, the 'state of nature'. They lived not in organized societies but 'except the government of small Families, the concord whereof dependeth on naturall lust, and have no government at all'.¹⁰ Thus, although they could not, except under extreme circumstances be enslaved, they might be restricted and, crucially, their lands might be taken from them. For the Spanish the appropriation of land was a matter of political sovereignty. The Spanish Crown was the legitimate ruler of the Americas and thus all territories fell under Crown control. The history of the English, and to some extent the French, attempts to legitimate the seizure of American Indian territories, however, casts a much more pronounced shadow over their supposed identity as persons. It also inevitably conditioned the response of the Indians themselves to the strangers in their midst (chapter 16).

The best-known, and certainly the most frequently-cited English argument in favour of the expropriation of aboriginal lands in America was John Locke's claim in *Second Treatise of Government* of 1689-90, that a man only acquired rights of ownership in a thing when he had 'mixed his *Labour* with, and joyned to it something that is his own',¹¹ As James Tully (chapter 3) shows, this had very far-reaching implications, not only for the colonists, but also for subsequent aboriginal attempts to reclaim their lands. For all its complexity, however, and Locke's celebration of his own originality, this is the development of the argument from Roman law known as *res nullius* which maintained that all 'empty things', which included unoccupied lands, remained the common property of all mankind, until they were put to some – generally agricultural – use. For Locke the American Indians' supposed ignorance of agriculture, and with it of a fully-developed sense of property, meant that 'America ... is still a Pattern of the first Ages in *Asia* and *Europe*, whilst the Inhabitants were too few for the Country, and want of People and Money gave Men no temptation to enlarge their Possessions of Land, or contest for wider extent of Ground'. And because the

¹⁰ *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, 1996), p. 89.

¹¹ *Second Treatise* 27, in *Locke's Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, 1960), p. 306.

Americans are in this condition, their rulers 'exercise very little Dominion and have a very moderate Sovereignty'.¹² Furthermore as the Indians are in this condition, still roaming the lands 'as do also the foxes and wild beasts', while other men have become settled agriculturists,¹³ it could also be argued that they had not merely failed to perform a necessary task; they had also somehow failed as human beings. A version of this 'agriculturist argument' as it has sometimes been called, occupied a significant place in the Swiss diplomat Emeric de Wattel's *Le droit de gens ou principe de la loi naturelle* of 1758 which became the textbook account of the nature of natural rights of property in the second-half of the eighteenth century. 'The cultivation of the soil', Wattel wrote

not only deserves the attention of a government because of its great utility, but in addition is *an obligation imposed upon man by nature* [emphasis added]. Every nation is therefore bound by natural law to cultivate the land which has fallen to its share ... Those peoples such as the Ancient Germans and certain modern Tartars who, though dwelling in fertile countries, disdain the cultivation of the soil and prefer to live by plunder, fail in their duty to themselves, injuring their neighbours and deserve to be exterminated like wild beasts of prey.¹⁴

Behind this lay centuries of reflection upon this 'obligation' which nature had imposed upon mankind. In the physics of Aristotle, which was to remain dominant in Europe until the early-seventeenth century, nature existed in a state of potentiality, whose *actuality* could only be realised through purposeful action. This action was in part nature's own. Acorns, as Aristotle, said were potential trees. But trees were also potentially, but not actually, chairs. It required man's art, his *techne*, to release from the tree its essential 'chairness'. *Techne* – or as we would say technology, and what in Latin, the other dominant language in the cognitive vocabulary of Europe, was called *ars* – is the human capacity to transform the world according to human needs. This, for the Greeks, was a form of knowledge (*logos*). *Techne* is the abstract from *tikto* which means to 'generate' or 'engender', humans are the *teknotes*, the genitors and the *tekna* are their offspring. *Techne* was the power to set in motion, a power which none besides humankind and the gods themselves possessed. There can be little doubt, however much we may now regret the fact, that the West has, for long periods of its recent history, exercised technological and political mastery over much of the rest of the world. It is also likely that the power of European technology derives from the ancient conviction, strengthened by the radical transformation of science in the seventeenth century, that the ability to harness nature is part of what it is to be human.

¹² *Second Treatise* 108 in *Locke's Two Treatises of Government*, pp. 357-8.

¹³ Robert Cushman, *Reasons and Considerations Touching the Lawfulness of Removing out of England into Parts of America* (London, 1622), f. 2v.

¹⁴ *Le droit de gens ou principe de la loi naturelle. Appliqués à la conduite aux affaires des nations et des souverains*, 3 vols, ed. James Brown Scott (Washington, 1916), vol. I, pp. 37-8.

Men were thus encouraged to see in the natural world a design of which they were the final beneficiaries. 'Art itself', as the eighteenth-century Scottish social theorist Adam Ferguson was later to observe, 'is natural to man ... he is destined from the first age of his being to invent and to contrive'.¹⁵ For Wattel, therefore, the cultivation of the lands, Locke's 'mingling of labour', is not simply improvement; instead, it becomes an indication of what is properly human. Those, by implication all Native Americans other than the Aztecs and the Inca, who fail to fulfil this obligation, do not merely choose one, albeit inferior, means of subsistence over another. They fail 'in their duty to themselves' as men, something which, since it clearly constitutes a violation of the law of nature, makes them less than human creatures. Claims, which sought in this way to dehumanize hunter-gatherers emerge in a number of eighteenth-century defences of the conquest of America, and were to surface again in the British attempts to legitimize their occupation of Australia.

Such an account of American society bore no resemblance to the ethnographic data with which Locke – famously an avid reader of travel accounts – or Wattel were surely familiar. But no European claim to sovereignty or to property paid much heed to such data, for the simple reason that any alternative system of political authority, property ownership or land tenure which the American Indians might practise were looked upon not as alternatives, but simply as aberrations. For this reason, as Karen Kupperman shows (chapter 18) treaties between Indians and Europeans were often based upon serious misunderstandings as to what concession, or indeed ownership, implied and consequently led to the European assumption that the Indians were untrustworthy and deceitful.

America had been Europe's first 'new world', its first encounter with a people of whose very existence it had hitherto been wholly unaware. Its second was with the peoples of the Pacific. From Magellan's circumnavigation in 1522 until the mid-eighteenth century, the exploration of the Pacific had been a somewhat uneven business. Stories of a mysterious southern continent, the *Terra australis*, circulated widely in the seventeenth century and were sufficiently persuasive for the Vatican to create a *prefectura* for it in 1681. It was not, however, until the discovery of Tahiti by Samuel Wallis in 1767, and the far more significant visit by the French mathematician and explorer Antoine de Bougainville the following year, that the immense potential of the region, and the sheer novelty of its inhabitants became familiar in Europe. In 1771 Bougainville published an account of his voyage, which became a best-seller. This, and a letter by the surgeon on the voyage, Philibert Commerson, which had appeared in the *Mercur de France* the year

¹⁵ *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* [1767], ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge, 1995), p. 12.

before, established Tahiti – 'la nouvelle Cythère' as Bougainville had called it after the island on which Venus had been born – as an erotic paradise. In Bougainville's and later Cook's accounts the people who, in Roy Porter's words, 'gave the world the word *taboo* had no taboo about eros' (chapter 22, p. 565). But the Pacific islands were not merely the rococo pleasure grounds that these descriptions made of them (See chapter 24). They were, as Alan Frost explains, for the French in particular, a place where it might be possible to find the truly 'noble savage' (chapter 23). Bougainville had, indeed, brought back with him a man he called Aotourou, whose observations on Parisian life offered for the first time an insight into how 'savages' reacted when confronted with 'civilized' life. (Aotourou also became the Orou of Diderot's *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, a wholly rationalist exponent of the virtues of 'natural' society.) Unlike Martin Frobisher's poor Eskimos who left no record of their brief stay in England, Aotourou's reactions to everything from the nature of French government to the Paris Opera, as well as the vocalic structure of his speech, were recorded in detail. A similar experiment was conducted by Captain Cook who brought back a native of the Sandwich Islands from his second voyage (chapter 23). Although Cook seems to have had a low opinion of his intellect, based largely on his failure to be impressed by the splendours of London, Mai or Omai as he came to be called, had his portrait painted by Reynolds, proved to be a great favourite at court, and became the subject of several popular plays.

The Pacific, as Frost says, 'like the Americas before it ... gave rise to new perceptions of nature and society (chapter 23, p. 822). But it seemed also to be a place where the deleterious effects of the European colonization of America might somehow be reversed. Charles de Brosses' *Histoire des navigations aux terres australes* of 1756 conjured up the image of a new America in the Antipodes, with peoples similar in culture and disposition to those which Columbus and his successors had all but destroyed. 'But suppose', wrote De Brosses,

a future which is not at all like that which Christopher Columbus secured for our neighbours ... Their example would instruct us. For we would avoid the two vices from which the Spaniards then suffered, avarice and cruelty. The former emptied their own country in pursuit of an illusory fortune, something which should never have been attempted. The latter, whose causes were national pride and superstition, has all but destroyed the human race in America. They massacred disdainfully, and as if they were base and alien beasts, millions of Indians whom they could have made into men. They destroyed to the last man, hundreds of races, as though there was some profit to be had from uninhabited lands.

'Experience, however has shown', De Brosses continued, 'that in these distant climates, one must trade not conquer, that it is not a question of establishing imaginary kingdoms beyond the equator'. Instead of colonies, the new French

Empire of the Pacific would be a network of trading stations, working for the mutual benefit of all those involved with them. It was this which underpinned Diderot's hope for a future state based on the image of a racial harmony which would not merely quieten the Enlightenment's horror at the devastation which had followed the European colonists overseas. It would also provide for all humanity the image of a happy state poised, as Diderot phrased it, 'half-way between savagery and civility'.¹⁶

Europeans were not, however, faced only with 'savages'. They also had on their eastern frontiers peoples, most obviously the Russians, whose existence threw into sometimes stark relief the fact that Europe was a culture, a shared way of life, rather than a place. Russia had many of the features of a European society, and it was undeniably Christian. Yet in its vast size, in the fact that so much of it had, for so long, been ruled by nomadic peoples who were clearly not European, it also lay beyond the formal limits of Romanized 'civilization'. While it remained, in this way, stubbornly an oriental despotism, Russia lay firmly within Asia, the backward barbaric empire of the steppes. But once in the eighteenth century its rulers took to wearing silk brocade and conversing in French, it became inescapably Europeanized. In their ambition to subjugate Europe, as Rousseau observed, the Russians had themselves been subjugated. Peter the Great, the first of the Czars to 'modernise', which meant 'Europeanize', the Russian Empire was described by Montesquieu as 'having given the manners of Europe to a non-European power'.¹⁷ European manners in these contexts were associated with what was called 'Enlightenment'. And 'Enlightenment' became a mark of identity, one which, as Yuri Slezkine demonstrates in chapter 25, could be used not merely to align the Russians with the other powers of Europe, but also to distinguish between Russians and the un-redeemably savage Moldavians, Mingrelians and the countless other peoples of the steppes all the way to Beijing.

Russia has always occupied an anomalous position in the cultural geography of Europe. China, however, was unmistakably Asiatic. In the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it became a cultural 'other' for educated Europeans, the source of countless luxury goods, which prompted the passion for what in France was called *chinoiserie*, and for beguiling tales which went back to the days of Marco Polo (chapter 10). But China was not merely a familiar location for the exotic, the easternmost limit of Le Goff's 'Oneiric Horizon'; it also seemed to offer possible models for improvement. China was more obviously comparable to a European monarchy, in terms of its size and technological expertise, than any other non-European state. It therefore became a focus of increasing interest in Europe as a model of a 'prudent empire', and the proof that such an empire

¹⁶ See Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c.1500-c.1800* (New Haven and London, 1995), pp. 151-2.

¹⁷ *De l'esprit des lois*, XIX, 15.

was capable of maintaining stability over a seemingly vast period of historical time.

Ever since Marco Polo's celebrated description of the seventeen years he claimed to have spent there between 1274 and 1291, supposedly in the service of Kublai Khan, Western Europe had maintained sporadic contact with China. It was not, however, until the first Jesuit mission was established by Matteo Ricci in 1583, that any sustained and serious attempt to understand and evaluate Chinese culture was made. Ricci learned Mandarin, dressed as a Chinese, was widely respected and lived in China until his death in 1610. The account which he and his fellow Jesuits provided of the Middle Kingdom greatly extended what had hitherto been largely conjecture or based on information which was incomplete. The Jesuits' sympathy for, and understanding of Chinese culture was both genuine and profound. But their ultimate purpose was not to understand but to convert. This posed a problem, since the Chinese, unlike either the American Indians or later the Polynesians, were not 'savages' in European eyes. Their religion was not the contemptible, polytheistic, sanguineous body of superstitions which it was believed required only persistence and the destruction of sacred images to erase. Converting the Chinese would require persuasion based on rational debate with skilled opponents. The Jesuits, therefore, went to China not merely with copies of the Bible and an armoury of missionary techniques which they had practised on peoples in Asia and India; they also took with them clocks, astrolabes, telescopes, clavichords, Venetian prisms and suction pumps. If, the argument went, the European God had taught the Europeans how to devise such ingenious things, it followed that the European God must be the true one. To this end, Father Giulio Aleni produced, with the help of Chinese associates, a cosmography in 1623, whose objective was to demonstrate the close connection between scientific knowledge and the kind of rational religion which Christianity claimed to be (chapter 12). The Chinese, however, had other conceptions of the necessary relationship between technology and religious belief, and while grateful for the clocks declined the offer of the Gospel. This refusal to accept what he took to be the obvious led Ricci to declare that 'they have no logic', and the Chinese to accuse the missionaries of indulging in 'countless incomprehensible lines of reasoning' (chapter 11). Like the Japanese (chapter 13) the Chinese looked upon the Europeans as potentially dangerous, but also potentially useful outsiders, peoples whose technological achievements were undeniable, but whose customs and beliefs were incomprehensible to the point of insanity. As one Chinese scholar observed, making the kind of distinction which European logic could not accept, 'Westerners were clever at examining and fathoming things, but incapable of penetrating the innermost workings of the universe'.¹⁸

¹⁸ Quoted in Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, 1982), p. 59.

Despite their disagreement over the logical premises supposedly sustaining the Christian faith, the Jesuit descriptions of China were, as others had been before, largely favourable. With the exception of the Ottoman Empire (the only other polity dignified by European rulers with the term *imperium*), China was the largest known non-European monarchy. It was stable, something very few European states were in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and it was held together by a single controlling orthodoxy, Confucianism. This, as Walter Davis argues in chapter 14, made China not only seem likely to be receptive to Christianity because of the similarities between Christian-Stoic ethics and those of the neo-Confucians, it also offered the image of a people unified in their beliefs in the ways which Europe had been before the Reformation.¹⁹ Confucianism could also be made to seem at least compatible with Christianity, to the extent that, in what came to be known as the 'Rites Controversy', a number of Jesuits were prepared to suggest that Chinese religion belonged to a pre-Mosaic form of natural observance known as the 'Ancient theology'. This seemed to make the Chinese proto-Christians, or at least 'virtuous pagans', those, that is, who although through no fault of their own had not heard the Gospel, yet through natural wisdom had intuited all of its basic moral and religious tenets. Needless to say this view was not well received by the authorities of either the Jesuit order itself or the Papacy. The controversy over the status of Chinese belief systems came to an end in 1700 when Father Louis Le Comte's *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'état Présent de la Chine* (1696), in which the view of Chinese religion as a natural precursor to Christianity had been argued most forcefully, was condemned by the Theology Faculty of the Sorbonne (chapter 15). In 1724, when the Emperor came to hear about the controversy, he responded by forbidding Christian worship in China. But it was not only Chinese religion or moral philosophy which, since the appearance of Marco Polo's *Description of the World* in 1298, had so impressed the West: it was the organization of Chinese society. Here, in Jonathan Spence's words, was 'a benevolently ruled dictatorship, colossal in scale, decorous in customs, rich in trade, highly urbanized, inventive in commercial dealings, weak in the ways of war'.²⁰ Spence is describing Marco Polo's image of China, but much the same features emerge from the compilation of Jesuit narratives known as the *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* of 1709, or Jean Baptiste du Halde's *Description de l'empire de la Chine* of 1735.

In the second-half of the eighteenth century, and in particular after the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1762, European opinion about China became polarized around precisely this image of a supposedly benevolent dictatorship. For many, in particular the French economic theorists known as the 'physiocrats', China

¹⁹ See also Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact*, pp.141-92.

²⁰ *The Chan's Great Continent, China in Western Minds* (New York and London, 1998), p. 3.

seemed to be the only significant exception to the deeply-held political belief that only small states – exemplified by Sparta in the ancient and Venice in the modern world – could hope to avoid the cycle of rise, consolidation and decline to which all extensive empires were bound by their very nature. How then had the Chinese seemingly eluded this sorry cycle of rise and inevitable decline? In a short treatise entitled *Despotisme de la Chine*, which first appeared in *Ephemerides du citoyen, ou bibliothèque raisonnée des sciences morales et politiques*, for 1767, François Quesnay, the most influential of the physiocrats, suggested what was to prove the most controversial answer to this question. It was, furthermore, an answer which has had a largely unrecognised impact on European views of China, and on the familiar Weberian characterization of the uniqueness of the societies of the Western world.

Many European observers had attributed China's stability to its situation. With all its natural enemies held in check by mountains, the sea or the Great Wall, it had nothing to fear from outsiders. And because the Chinese were believed to have only limited navigational skills, they had for centuries been isolated from the external forces which had brought about the collapse of other empires. This Quesnay rejected. China, he pointed out, had been invaded, and 'its vast expanses had to undergo divisions and formed many kingdoms'. The empire's continuing ability to survive repeated invasions by nomadic 'barbarians', invasions which had brought total ruin to the Roman Empire, could only have been the consequence of the resilience of the Empire's internal structure. This alone had allowed it to absorb and to transform its Mongol conquerors. China's success in this respect could, Quesnay believed, be attributed to two closely-related factors which made China quite unlike any society in Europe. The first was that in China the laws of nature were sovereign, and obeyed by all without question. In China it was not the government, as Montesquieu and others had supposed, which was 'despotic', it was instead nature's laws. The second was that in China the various components of the political culture – religion, custom, the law and, in the broadest sense of the term, 'economics' – were fully integrated into a single system.²¹

The Chinese alone had understood that nature's objective was prosperity. China had therefore been able to manage the cultural, and hence also the political, transformation which the European empires had failed even to understand the need for. In this massive Empire, agriculture had replaced warfare. And in Quesnay's view, only a truly agricultural nation could 'establish a fixed and lasting empire under a general invariable government, subject directly to the immutable order of the natural law'. This was why in China the farmer, not the warrior, was the exemplary man. And because the laws of nature, rather than those of the status

²¹ *Ephemerides du citoyen, ou bibliothèque raisonnée des sciences morales et politiques* vol. 3 (Paris, 1767), pp. 5-88.

hierarchies of the feudal order, were sovereign, farmers could rise to positions of power and eminence unthought of in Europe.

This view of China's stability had, however, another face. For Denis Diderot (see chapter 15) and Mably, like Montesquieu before them, China's stability could only have contributed to its stagnation. It was, like the Ottoman Sultanate – although in significantly different ways – an 'oriental despotism', unchanging only because it failed to develop either its political or its economic potential. Quesnay's claim that the Chinese had conquered their conquerors, which Voltaire had held out as evidence of the supreme efficiency and benevolence of the Chinese administration, was, Diderot argued, merely the consequence of massive Chinese population growth. 'Nature', he wrote 'desires that the greater masses rule the lesser and this law is applicable in the moral as well as physical context (quoted chapter 15, p. 229).

Ultimately the eighteenth-century debate over how to understand China depended, as Mably – who in 1768 wrote a critique of Quesnay's *Despotisme de la Chine*, with the title *Doutes proposées aux philosophes économistes sur l'ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* – recognized, on the value one placed on the liberty of the individual to interpret the world. For Mably, China was a society ruled by 'the most puerile of ceremonies', inhabited by 'the most regimented people on earth and the least capable of thought', whose famous meritocracy was selected only on the basis of an exam which never once asked the only important question: 'if that which is done, is that which should be done'.²² For Mably, for Montesquieu, for Diderot, the laws of nature, like the laws of man, required interpretation. For Quesnay, by contrast, nature was transparent. And interpretation had only ever been disruptive, resulting in vast and contradictory bodies of civil law. It is an image which has set up on one side a vision of the European and later American West, as dominated by a particularist – and ultimately relativist – view of society. This has been frequently challenged, and for long periods repressed, but it has never been extinguished, and it is a view determined by an overriding concern with rationality.²³ On the other side lies the 'Orient', for so long Europe's 'other', a world composed of societies which are centralized and unified, where the laws are not only mandatory but also unchanging, and where reason takes the form not of interpretation – from which follows the technology which has always characterized the European sense of superiority and been the instrument of European engrandisement – but of simple exegesis. The Chinese, that is, followed nature; they did not exploit it. In the end, they shared this in common with other 'savages'.

²² Gabriel Bonnet de Mably, *Doutes proposées aux philosophes économistes sur l'ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* (The Hague, 1768), pp. 132–3.

²³ On the question of the 'rational' West and the 'irrational' East see Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge, 1996).

Throughout the period covered by these essays, and well beyond, all Europeans operated with a distinct sense of the superiority of their technologies and, when they professed them, of their religious beliefs. They also assumed that most forms of government were *mutatis mutandis* the same the world over, and that such matters as sexual relations, family structure and the sense of property were broadly-speaking definitions of what it was to be human. But they were by no means so confident in their superiority as they are generally represented as being. European self-confidence was based upon a powerful and enduring tradition of self-examination and self-loathing, the Stoic-Christian recognition that mankind was forever unable to measure up to his own best expectations of himself. This left a space for the non-European, the radically different 'other', to be redescribed, as he was by a series of writers from Montaigne to Diderot, as a critic of European society, as that society's 'other' in the same sense that 'nature' stood to 'culture'. One of the earliest of these, as we have seen, were the Tupinamba with whom Montaigne claims to have discussed politics at Rouen. Montaigne only gives his Indians a few sentences, all of which are recorded in the third person. By contrast the Baron de Lahontan's fictional Huron 'Adario' is allowed to speak in his own voice, even if it is, in fact, also that of a thinly-disguised European sceptic. Adario not only denounces prevailing European views on sex, religion and justice, he also challenges the whole basis of European civilization in a written script which could be manipulated by those in power for their own ends (chapter 8). It is true, as Roger Mercier says, that this leads to 'simple Manichaeism' (chapter 8, p. 221) which could be and has been construed as the final act of cultural appropriation. It is true, too, that most of the 'bons sauvages' of the eighteenth century bear only a superficial resemblance to their cultural models. 'This speech seems fierce to me, but in spite of what I find abrupt and primitive I detect ideas and turns of phrase which appear European' wryly observes the character A in Diderot's dialogue *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, of an entirely bogus speech which Diderot attributes to an old Tahitian.²⁴ Diderot's irony makes of his Tahitian a self-conscious player in a European fiction, much as Montesquieu's 'Persians' Uzbek and Rica adrift in the 'other universe' which is France, or Oliver Goldsmith's Chinese 'Citizen of the World' in London. The role of all these 'outsiders', who are also our other selves, is in Todorov's term to 'defamiliarize' the familiar, to allow we, who are really they, to perceive our world through their eyes.²⁵ If they – the real, the ethnographic 'they' – cannot or will not speak about 'us', or if what they say is in reality disappointingly unlike what we had hoped they might say, then they can always be made to speak in the unmistakable and seemingly perennial voice of the European critic.

²⁴ *Oeuvres*, ed. Laurent Versini (Paris, 1994), vol. III, pp. 550–51.

²⁵ *Nous et les autres. La réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (Paris, 1989), p. 389.

But if the 'other' became in this way appropriated to a familiar form of European scepticism, he could also be made to stand in for the 'Enlightenment' concern with the Christian-Stoic conviction that the human race constituted a single species, that cultural difference was a means of understanding the necessary sources of human sociability. In this discourse the 'other' became an instrument with which to measure the space which separated 'civilized' man from his past. Travelling became a form of knowledge, a potentially dangerous form because, as Descartes had observed, if one stayed away too long, the traveller always ran the risk of never being able to return.²⁶ But it was a form of knowledge which could, if only in the imagination, eliminate the distances which separated the civilized European from his 'primitive origins'. As Joseph-Marie De Gérando noted in his 'Considérations sur les divers méthodes à suivre dans l'observation des peuples sauvages', the foundation document for the aptly-named *Société des observateurs de l'homme* in 1800, what he called the 'traveller-philosopher', who travels

to the farthest reaches of the Globe, travels, in fact along the road of time, he travels in the past. Every step he takes is a century passed. The Islands he reaches are the cradle of human society. The peoples whom our ignorant vanity despises are revealed to him like ancient and majestic monuments form the origins of time.²⁷

The creation of the *Société des observateurs de l'homme* conveniently marks the end of our period. But it marks also the beginning of the last phase in the history of the relationship between Europe and its 'others', a phase which will finally result in the creation of the modern discipline of anthropology with its insistence that so far as such a thing is humanly possible, 'they' be treated on their own terms and in languages that they would recognise. As Todorov remarks, De Gérando still assumes that because he is committed to a view of them as the Europeans' remote but still-living ancestors, the ideas of the 'savages' must be simple and their languages poor: civilization is, after all, the evolution from the simple to the complex (chapter 9, pp. 239–40). But he was also amongst the first to insist on the absurdity of claiming that all 'savages' are identical. And he is insistent that not only do we need to understand them on their own terms, but that our very presence amongst them alters their relationship to us. Here, and possibly for the first time, is the sense of the subject which is missing from so much early 'ethnography', the sense that there must be in any 'encounter' the recognition that we are all looking at each other.

²⁶ See Wolf Lepenies, "Interesting questions" in the history of philosophy and elsewhere', in Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 146–7.

²⁷ In Jean Copans and Jean Jamin, eds, *Aux origines de l'anthropologie française. Les Mémoires de la Société des observateurs de l'homme* (Paris, 1978), pp. 131–2.

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1

The Medieval West and the Indian Ocean: An Oneiric Horizon

Jacques Le Goff

The medieval West knew nothing of the real Indian Ocean. As late as the mid-fifteenth century, the Catalonian mappemonde in the Biblioteca Estense in Modena shows utter ignorance of the Indian Ocean.¹ On the planisphere of Fra Mauro of Murano (1460), the east coast of the Persian Gulf “no longer has the form of land.”² Despite his use of Marco Polo, Martin Behaim's globe of 1492 shows no knowledge of India. South Africa, Madagascar, and Zanzibar are depicted on it in extravagant and fantastic form. We must await the first Portuguese discoveries before geographical—or, rather, coastal—knowledge of the Indian Ocean begins to take shape. The most important date is 1488, the year of Diaz's return to Lisbon. There is still a good deal of fantasy in Doctor Hamy's *Carta navigatoria auctor incerti* (1501–2), but its map of eastern Africa is very good. The portolano-mappemonde of Caneiro Januensis (1503) is much more precise.³ On the whole, knowledge of the Indian Ocean begins with Africa—and the Portuguese—in contrast with medieval dreams, which turned primarily toward Persia, India, and the islands.

Nevertheless, there had been some progress in the fifteenth century.⁴ This was due primarily to the rediscovery of Ptolemy, who, unlike the ignorant Roman geographers who were the main source for medieval cartographers, knew the Indian Ocean fairly well. Ptolemy's rediscovery dates from 1406 but bore fruit only with the introduction of printing. The earliest printed editions I have been able to locate in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris are from Vicenza (1475), Rome (1478 and 1490), Bologna (1482), and Ulm (1482 and 1486). The work was not always put immediately to good use, however, as Martin Behaim's globe indicates, although he did in fact use the Ulm editions.