Savages, Romans, and Despots: thinking about others from Montaigne to Herder

by Robert Launay, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2018, 258 pp., £24.50/$32.50 (paperback), ISBN 9780226575391

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To the question of how early modern Europeans developed their sense of self, Robert Launay, professor of history of anthropological theory at Northwestern University, provides a comprehensive answer in Savages, Romans, and Despots. He argues that early modern Europeans constructed their identity in contrast to non-European 'others'. Launay circumvents a theoretical debate on what 'the Other' is and rejects a uniform historical definition. Instead, he pragmatically allows the 'others' to be any contrasting representation of non-European peoples, which often took the form of 'savages', 'Orientals', 'ancients' and 'despots'.

To support his thesis, Launay traces the rhetorical purpose and use of such 'others' in the texts of a plethora of early modern European thinkers. This book predominantly draws inspiration from Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, which posited that knowledge should be understood in its own context. It also draws from Edward Said's notion that European representations of the Middle East were invested with pre-conceptions and an agenda of colonialism and domination. As such, Launay explicitly did not write a teleological history of anthropological theory, but is instead concerned with 'understanding early modern authors in terms of the kinds of questions they are asking, and not simply their answers' (p. 8). The result is a rich and rewarding book with many cases of how European thinkers employed the representation of 'others' in their texts on political theory, philosophy, history, missionary expeditions, law and religion.

The book is organized chronologically and divided into 12 thematic chapters. Each chapter examines the meaning and purpose of 'others' in the work of a wide array of authors and thinkers. It includes figures such as the essayist Michel de Montaigne, and Jesuit missionaries in China and New France. It also covers prominent figures from the French, Scottish, British and German Enlightenment like Bernard Le Bouyer de Fontenelle, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Ferguson, Edward Gibbon and Johann Gottfried Herder. The fact surnames often suffice in this book attests to Launay's adherence to the canon of thinkers one would find in a traditional intellectual history. There are some notable exceptions, however, such as the consideration of the interaction between Jesuits and Chinese people, culture and Confucianism represented in the texts and subsequent translations of Matteo Ricci's account of his expedition in China.

The wide scope in terms of geography and chronology is the most important asset of the book. Launay moves with ease from John Mandeville's fourteenth-century travel account to eighteenth-century Enlightenment essays and histories. Since the book does not offer a grand narrative, the chapters are self-contained and can stand alone as isolated studies. This proves to be a great strength, since it challenges the reader to compare different authors and the implementation of 'others' in their work. In the sixteenth century, Montaigne saw the leaders around him, such as Henri III and Henri of Navarre, as mediocre and unheroic, in contrast with his idealized representation of the Tupi people in Brazil as pure and natural. These 'others', or 'cannibals', seemed far less barbaric to him than the bellicose and brawling leaders in Reformation Europe. The accounts of Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century presented their 'others' in a different way. For example, Louis Lecomte, a French Jesuit missionary, saw the stability of Chinese government as an example of order and stability, a natural result of its principles of government and morality. Lecomte saw the potential of China to become a Christian empire, and was convinced the teachings of Confucius could be reconciled with Christian teachings of faith. Similarly, Joseph-François Lafitau maintained a positive representation of Native American peoples in his accounts of New France. He
considered them intelligent and well suited to conversion, thereby also portraying his own missionary mission as a success. In all of these cases, Launay clearly shows the representations of all these ‘others’ served the purposes of the authors and were in no way attempts to accurately describe them.

Launay shows how Enlightenment authors were fervent readers of these Jesuits’ accounts of non-European ‘others’, and consequently interpreted them selectively to suit their own agendas. On the one hand, Voltaire portrayed China as an excellent model of government, while Montesquieu could just as easily consider it to be an example of the results of despotism. Launay explains this contradiction by resorting to their political preference: Voltaire was in favour of absolute rule as a monarchist, while Montesquieu’s vision of China reflected his disdain for Louis XIV’s despotic rule. Launay finds this malleability of the representations of ‘others’, too, in the political work of British and Scottish authors such as Adam Ferguson and Edward Gibbon. In their work, Chinese despotism became a common spectre to argue against absolute or central rule. The book ends with a consideration of the work of Herder, who adopted a form of cultural relativism in his cumulative history foundational to the imagining of the nation of Germany.

After this engaging journey through early modern Europe, the reflection in the conclusion is a bit underwhelming. It summarizes the book and reaffirms the main thesis that representations of non-European peoples were essential in early modern formulations of law, religion, politics and culture. At this point, it would have been useful to know why and how individual cases were chosen. Without such a rationale, the selection seems arbitrary and leaves the reader wondering what the selection criteria were, and, more problematically, what the included cases represent. Despite this open-ended question, Launay offers a well-organized overview of his book and draws thought-provoking parallels in the final chapter.

Overall, the book should be praised on account of its wide scope and intriguing examples of how Europeans represented non-Europeans in their work. It can be read completely as a critical prehistory of anthropology, but at the same time the chapters can serve as cultural historical examples of identity formation in relation to ‘others’. In this diligent work, ‘others’ are – to borrow Launay’s citation of Lévi-Strauss – certainly ‘good to think’.

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