I. Savages and natural man in Rousseau’s Second Discourse

In his still today indispensable The Fall of Natural Man, Anthony Pagden drew a distinction between a natural man ‘living outside human society’, as understood in the sixteenth century by those scholastic theologians and humanist rhetoricians he was concerned with, and the Enlightenment (or Rousseauian) view of natural man as a man stripped of the artificial trappings of civilization. If the history of the European intellectual encounter with the American Indian could be construed as the ‘fall’ of the Aristotelian image of natural man as a man who had failed to fulfil its pre-determined social condition (a distinct theme from the Christian idea of the fallen condition of mankind into sinfulness), the early modern trajectory more generally is surely the history of the opposite process, the rise of natural man as a central concept of the Enlightenment. And if Pagden’s account outlined the intellectual steps by which, within the context of Spanish imperial and ecclesiastical debate, a comparative ethnology of the barbarian replaced the Aristotelian stereotype, my argument here is about how, in a general European context, empirical ethnography about ‘savages’ affected in varying and sometimes paradoxical ways the philosophical debate about what being human was, and should be, about. While from the perspective of cultural and intellectual history, the rise of natural man to a position of prominence – be it in the context
of political theory or, more generally, history and philosophy - is indisputable, its relationship to actual encounters and ethnographies of the savage is far less clear. In any case this rise, or any previous fall that we might want to talk about, can not be seen as relating to one single idea or interpretation. Rather, what I think needs to be emphasized is the plurality and even ambivalence of ideas of savagism and natural man in a variety of early modern anthropologies.

Some of the potential for ambiguity in the concept of ‘natural man’ derives from the various meanings of the word *nature*: natural man was to begin with ‘what man really is (or was)’ in the state of nature, but also, in the natural law tradition, which assumed a rational element to nature, it could also be ‘what man should be’ according to right reason. This ambiguity was crucial to the reception of ethnographic accounts of ‘real savages’ because, whilst these could inform the empirical investigation of ‘what man really is’, they could also help challenge the idea that it was civilization that best represented what men should be. In other words, the real debate was whether civilization fulfils, or, indeed, corrupts human nature. The reception of the early modern ethnography of savages suggests that a number of European philosophers who might be classified as ‘libertine’ thinkers increasingly questioned the simply positive valuation of civilization as fulfilling human nature, that is, the position implicit in the dominant humanist and scholastic traditions.

Rousseau’s *Discourse on the origin and foundations of inequality among men* (1755), or Second Discourse, can be taken as a starting point for a retrospective analysis, since in this work natural man may be said to have reached its high point as a figure of the Enlightenment debate on civilization. Rousseau’s idea of natural man as a solitary being, naked and homeless, without concern for material goods and free from the passions, basically unsociable but capable of compassion, and in fact without even an elaborate language or family structure, was powerful and original in its radical conception.

1 Of the many general discussions of Rousseau’s anthropology and his idea of natural man, I have found most useful Victory Goldschmidt, *Anthropologie et politique: les principes du système de Rousseau* (Paris, 1974), and A. M. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man* (Chicago, 2000). The classical article by Arthur Lovejoy, “The supposed primitivism of Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*, *Modern Philology*, 21 (1923): 165-86, questioning the idea that Rousseau sought to portray the pure state of nature as desirable, remains salutary and offers useful distinctions, but underestimates Rousseau’s positive valuation of man’s natural instincts and his ambivalence towards ‘perfectibility’.
the one hand, and modern accounts of savages, on the other. It is this aspect which I wish to explore here.

In relation to his use of ethnography, it is worth emphasizing at the outset that Rousseau’s argument is often misunderstood, because his modern savages – the savages he read about in travel accounts - were no longer natural men, but instead represented a subsequent stage in a process of historical evolution, a process in which the rise of civilization was also the beginning of moral corruption. Caribs and Hottentots helped the philosopher think about natural man, but did not represent natural man in a pure state. Despite Rousseau’s explicit rejection of the philosophical idealism of the natural law theorists that took man’s rationality and modern passions for granted, his image of natural man remained, at heart, non-empirical, much as Hobbes’ equivalent idea of the state of nature (which Rousseau sought to replace) had been: the natural man of the Second Discourse was the result of historical speculation based on ‘negative’ reduction, that is, on stripping away all the elements that make up man as a civilized being. In this way Rousseau challenged the classical (Aristotelian) and Renaissance (scholastic or Christian humanist) assumption that man is only man because he is both rational and social. A social life was not a necessity for natural man. Rather, sociability was the outcome of man’s perfectibility, which indeed led him to freedom and rational enlightenment, but also to many errors, moral corruption and unhappiness.

In order to construct his natural man, however, Rousseau found inspiration in an alternative tradition of classical primitivism developed by Stoic and Epicurean writers. One of its themes, the positive valuation of natural simplicity, was exemplified by Seneca in one of his most famous letters, on...

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3 Opinion remains divided on the extent to which Rousseau’s state of nature was meant to be taken as purely conjectural in a Hobbesian manner rather than historically factual. For an argument emphasizing the theoretical element see Victor Gourevitch, “Rousseau’s ‘pure’ state of nature”, in *Interpretation*, 16 (1988): 23-59. There are however too many efforts by Rousseau to find empirical support for his account of the state of nature to make this interpretation fully convincing, ranging from the African apes who might be like natural men (perfectible but reduced to purely animal functions) to the minimally social and happy savages of travel accounts, and it makes little sense to isolate the ‘pure’ state of nature from the rest of the story. Even if methodologically Rousseau privileged theoretical speculation over historical research (and he necessarily had to), the power of his rhetoric relied on historical plausibility. A similar speculative but not a-historical method applied to his unpublished essay on the origins of languages, originally written in parallel to the *Second Discourse*.

4 “I do not see that one can seek the source of moral evil anywhere but in man, free, perfected, hence corrupted”, Rousseau, *The Discourses and other early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 234.
the theme of the Golden Age (*aetas aureas*), arguing that freedom and indeed true *humanitas*, the love of fellow humanity, had been lost through the greed that accompanied the process of civilization, and that ‘following nature’, the philosophical ideal of the Stoics, consisted of a virtuous return to a primitive simplicity (although he did not say that savage men could, in their state of ignorance, be called virtuous). Less obvious, but possibly equally crucial, was the influence of Lucretius, the Roman poet of the later Republic. In book V of *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius had offered a detailed image of the stages of the early history of man, as part of a didactic exposition of Epicurean Philosophy. Although Rousseau would condemn his teachings as perverse (alongside those of Hobbes and Mandeville), Lucretius was probably his most extensive model. Unlike Seneca and the Stoics, Lucretius was anti-Providentialist, a position Rousseau did not espouse, and the poet’s account of the primitive state of mankind was not entirely positive. However, Lucretius offered a naturalistic account of the growth of civilization, and one in which a new artificial morality eventually replaced the natural principles of strength and courage.

5 Seneca, letter XC to Lucilius. It seems likely that Seneca was following the Greek Stoic writer Posidonius, whose early history of mankind as a civilizing process accompanied by the growth of ills provided a common source to Seneca and Lucretius (and possibly Diodorus Siculus too). However, whilst Epicurus developed an atheistic interpretation of this process, Seneca did the opposite, emphasizing the high moral significance of a return to simple nature. The subtle point, not always appreciated, was to abandon the trappings of civilization from a position of rational knowledge, not to become a beast again, driven by passions. It is quite possible that it was Seneca who brought together the Golden Age myth of the poets with the Stoic account of the negative, denaturalizing effects of the early history of civilization, giving the narrative a fresh anti-Epicurean slant, and inspiring many subsequent Christian writers.

6 The dominant Christian traditions, in the West often inspired by Augustine, had been sympathetic to Seneca’s primitivism, which echoed the Biblical Eden, but emphatically rejected Lucretius’ anti-Providentialism, that is his attempt to explain all events in natural and human history without reference to any deity, offering a naturalistic explanation based on materialistic atomism whilst attacking all religion as superstition; however, from its discovery in the early fifteenth century by Poggio Bracciolini, the poem was published repeatedly and exerted an often invisible influence, especially amongst libertine writers. This influence however became more open throughout the Enlightenment, as it became easier to challenge religious orthodoxy.

7 Although the influence of Lucretius on Rousseau has not always received attention, it was noted by early critics. Consider Jean de Castillon, *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité parmi les hommes. Pour servir de réponse au Discours que M. Rousseau, citoyen de Genève, a publié sur le même sujet* (Amsterdam, 1756), vi, 20 and 255-66 (with extensive parallels). See also Jean Morel, “Recherches sur les sources du Discours sur l’inégalité”, *Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 5* (1909): 118-98.

8 A similar theme appeared in the opposition between barbarians and civilized developed by Latin writers such as Tacitus in his account of the German tribes: in an ambivalent image imbued with nostalgia, the Roman Empire brought peace and prosperity at the expense of liberty and natural virtue, and compared to the civilized, barbarians were hospitable, courageous and chaste. However, they were also indolent, and indeed, the most savage preferred to live in extreme poverty than under the tyranny of needs and obligations.
could build upon this image of loss of natural virtues to further assert that self-preservation (*amour de soi*) and compassion (*pitié*) already defined human nature in its original state, previous to any social contract or indeed rationality, providing principles of natural right that might inspire a more egalitarian and hence more satisfactory reconstruction of the political order⁹.

How then did these different elements, classical primitivist, ethnographic and philosophical, combine? Rousseau’s fundamental formulation of self-preservation and compassion as the two building blocks of natural law echoed the minimalist principles of Hugo Grotius¹⁰. However, his questioning attitude towards the process of civilization relied on classical primitivism supported with modern ethnography. Whilst Rousseau openly rejected an Epicurean anti-Providentialist world view (one that Diderot had in fact revived for Rousseau and his contemporaries), he silently adopted a Lucretian model of early man as a solitary being without language or family¹¹. Rousseau seems to have used the evidence of savages from a variety of travel accounts as supplementary to his historical speculation on how the progress of civilization also gave rise to an artificial moral and political system that increasingly betrayed the equality of those origins, a time when natural men were self-sufficient, morally innocent, and happy. To sum up this process, ‘the less natural and urgent man’s needs, the more his passions increase and, worse still, so does the power to satisfy them’¹². The Caribs were, among known peoples, those who

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⁹ Hence Rousseau rejected a natural law foundation for society, but believed that the “règles du droit naturel” derived from the agreement of these two pre-social principles. He also asserted that animals, which followed these same principles, logically also had natural rights, even if they could not recognize them rationally. But his project concerned mankind: it consisted in reconstructing the political order upon new foundations that recognized this truth about human nature, and hence the artificiality of many pernicious and oppressive social institutions too often assumed to be necessary by natural law theorists, most notably private property.

¹⁰ Rousseau also had in mind Samuel Pufendorf’s speculative account of how self-preservation led to the rise of social institutions, but his narrative offered a contrary interpretation. Similary, Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* was a reply to Bernard Mandeville and his *Fable of the Bees*, in particular the fifth and sixth dialogues of the second part (London, 1729), where Mandeville developed the Lucretian story of the progress of civilization along Hobbesian principles, that is, through a strict anthropology of selfish passions such as fear, greed and pride.

¹¹ As illustrated in his letter to Voltaire of 17 August 1756, Rousseau defended the concept of an impersonal Providence not occupied with individual human affairs (other than granting men an immortal soul), one which allowed him to interpret nature, hence also man in his natural state, in positive terms (Rousseau, *The Discourses*, 232-46). In this respect, he was closer to a Stoic deist than to a traditional Christian ‘priestly’ position, and at odds with Diderot’s materialism. Officially, Rousseau returned to Protestantism (following a long Catholic interlude) when he visited Geneva in 1754, just after completing his *Second Discourse*. However, his interpretation of Protestantism as a religion both natural (rational) and civil (tolerant) was very peculiar and his actual views, which questioned all revealed religion, remained highly controversial, as the reception of the *Émile* and the *Social Contract* (1762) in Geneva would eventually prove.

¹² Rousseau, *The Discourses*, 199 (I, 17, note ix). Here and elsewhere I quote the *Second Discourse* according to the translation by Victor Gourevitch, occasionally adapted according to the French original. For the latter I have used *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, eds. Blaise Bachofen and Bruno Bernardi (Paris : Flammarion, 2008).
remained closer to a natural state, but like all other savages, they already belonged to what Rousseau understood to be the second stage in the history of sociability, a stage half-way between animal simplicity and the formation of political societies regulated by laws. This was no longer natural man, but represented man at his happiest, because most equal:

The example of savages, almost all of whom have been found at this stage [when men began to congregate but before there were laws], seems to confirm that mankind was made to remain always in this state, the genuine youth of the world... So long as they applied themselves only to tasks a single individual could perform, and to arts that did not require the collaboration of several hands, they lived free, healthy, good, and happy as far as they could by their nature be, and continued to enjoy the gentleness of independent dealings with one another; but the moment one man needed the help of another, as soon as it was found useful for one man to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property appeared, work became necessary, and the vast forests were transformed into smiling fields that had to be watered with the sweat of men, and where slavery and misery were soon seen to sprout and grow together with the harvests.13

This passage elicits some questions which, I believe, require more attention than they have received. We may begin by considering to what extent was Rousseau informed by the ethnography he read in his travel sources – the Dominican missionary Jean-Baptiste du Tertre for those famous island Caribs, but also, elsewhere, the obscure adventurer François Corréal for the Caribs of Venezuela, or the German Peter Kolb for the African Hottentots (those same Hottentots whose rejection of civilization inspired the frontispiece to the Second Discourse)14.

These are the sources Rousseau makes explicit. Did Rousseau ignore classics of the earlier ethnography of savages, such as the influential account of the Tupinamba of Brasil written by the Huguenot pastor Jean de Léry, and published by the Protestant presses of Geneva in the late sixteenth century? The question is relevant, because Léry’s account of the natural virtues of the cannibal, rhetorically opposed to the corrupt morals of the Christian and civilized, in some ways pre-figured Rousseau’s type of argument.

This leads to a second question, Rousseau’s substantial contribution to the interpretation of ethnographic sources. Was Rousseau saying anything different from his illustrious predecessor Montaigne (whom Rousseau had read carefully) when he used the cannibals of Brazil to question the extent to which Christian Europeans adhered to natural law properly understood?15 To what extent was he

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13 Rousseau, The Discourses, 167.
14 This frontispiece (see figure 1) showed the image of a Hottentot who late in the seventeenth century had been taught the rudiments of Christian civilization, but who chose to return to his savage life and renounce all things European after returning to his country. It was a famous story, told by Peter Kolb and other travellers, and summarized by Rousseau in his note XIII from Prévost.
15 Rousseau’s reading of Montaigne in relation to some of the ideas of the Second Discourse is documented in his annotated copy of the 1652 edition of the Essays, now at Cambridge University Library. See Jean Starobinski, “Rousseau: notes en marge de Montaigne”, Annales
inspired by the attacks on private property and European religion more recently publicised by the baron de Lahontan by means of account of the Hurons of Canada? More generally, how generalized in the travel writing and cosmographies of the early enlightenment was the myth of the innocent or virtuous savage to which the narrative of loss of natural equality belonged?

Fig. 1 ‘Il retourne chez sez égaux’. Frontispiece to Jean Jacques Rousseau, Discourse sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes (Amsterdam: Marc Michel Rey, 1755). Reproduced by kind permission of University of Cambridge Library.

de la Societé Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 41 (1997): 11-56. Montaigne was in turn reading and quoting Seneca and Plutarch, and there is a clear genealogy liking the Stoic primitivism of these writers, Montaigne’s reading of them with a sceptical edge, and Rousseau’s critique of civilization, albeit his educational and political revisionism was novel within that tradition.
We must of course read the traditions of soft primitivism – the positive image of the life of men in a natural state – against the prevalence of negative images of savages as barbarians or cannibals, and a third question must relate to the contextual logic underlying these variations. Were there basically two images, positive and negative, broadly used with two kinds of agendas? While the political logic behind some of these uses cannot be ignored, there was no imperialist consensus in mid-eighteenth century Europe, and the role of colonial justifications can easily be exaggerated in the analysis of early-modern ethnographic sources. To what extent were the intellectual agendas behind the negative and positive images of savages conditioned by issues other than the justification or criticism of colonial empires?

II. Images of the savage in early modern ethnography, from Vespucci to Lahontan

In order to answer these questions it may be useful to distinguish four key elements of the myth of the savage in relation to ethnographic or pseudo-ethnographic sources. Although these themes have an analytical value, their emergence and development must be understood in relation to particular genres and contexts.

A first paradigm is clearly literary, and belongs to the epic genre in history and poetry: it consists of the rhetorical equality of civilized European and non-European barbarians within a ‘heroic’/chivalric paradigm renewed by classical models. There are glimpses of this ‘aristocratic savage’ in various Spanish and Portuguese narratives of conquest such as the letters of Cortés, but it becomes especially clear in epic poems like Alonso de Ercilla’s Araucania (1591). The theme would continue to echo until its final efflorescence in the romantic imagination.16

However, the relative equality of the European and the barbarian fighting each other was normally marginalized by the sixteenth-century image of the savage as representing ‘minimalist humanity’, that is, men living in a state somewhat close to (but not identical with) animals. This was a state that all men could revert to in the wrong circumstances – it represented what we all are underneath. Hence, when in 1542 the Spanish conqueror Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca described his dramatic shipwreck in the coast of modern Texas (Galveston Island), he made it obvious that the loss of all the trappings of civilization, including clothing, placed the Spanish at a level below the Indians amongst whom they found themselves, and Cabeza de Vaca interpreted the ritual crying of the local Karankawa – a particularly poor and primitive tribe – as an act of human sympathy for his own wretchedness.17 In those circumstances, it was the Spanish who reverted

17 “To see those men, who are so lacking in reason and so brutish, like animals, weeping on our behalf, made me and others in the group even more desperate”. Relación de los naufragios y comentarios de Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, ed. Manuel Serrano Sanz, Colección de
to cannibalism, and the humane and generous Indians were at this point scandalized. This image of minimalist humanity had, again, classical sources, in particular Aristotle’s influential idea that both rationality and sociability defined the distinctive nature of mankind; so did the notion of a primitive transition from a savage condition to civilization, described in particular detail by Epicurean and Stoic writers such as Lucretius or Diodorus of Sicily. The key issue was that from a humanist antiquarian perspective, the New World savages of modern ethnographic accounts were equated to the primitive barbarians of the ancient world – and especially ancient Europe – as represented in classical sources, in Tacitus for example. John White’s coupling of the Ancient Picts of the British Islands with the Algonquian tribes of Virginia, so effectively publicised by Theodor De Bry, stands as the clearest example of how by the late sixteenth century this equation had become iconic.

Under the combined pressure of antiquarian primitivism and the colonialist debate, a simple opposition between the savage and the civilized was eventually replaced by a more nuanced hierarchical and historical naturalism, a classification of degrees of barbarism (with ‘barbarism’ understood as lack of civility rather than simply as cultural difference) represented from the end of the sixteenth century by Jesuit historians and cosmographers like José de Acosta or Giovanni Botero. This was in some ways the fate of that natural man whose fall is at the centre of Anthony Pagden’s story: the Spanish debates about New World barbarians prompted by the dispute about the rights and wrongs of empire had the effect of questioning the Aristotelian image of natural slaves, that is to say, of the natural inferiority of barbarians. The assault was led by men like the Dominican theologian Francisco de Vitoria, who led by their religious universalism insisted that even the most savage amongst the barbarians were ultimately rational beings who could learn to be civil and Christian, and thus were entitled to natural rights such as liberty and property. It was very much as a result of that debate that the simple opposition between the civilized Europeans and irrational savages gave way to the idea that barbarians needed to be classified in a hierarchy of degrees of cultural development, implying that historical

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**notes**

18 *Relación de los naufragios*, 52.

19 Varro, Vitruvius, Horace, Virgil and Manilius echoed similar ideas. All seem to have influenced by Lucretius to some extent.

change could lead to some sort of progress of civilization. This paradigm was as we shall see influenced by humanist historiography, and eventually contributed to the philosophical histories of the Enlightenment concerning the origins and development of society, often informed by exotic ethnography. However, the idea that cultural differences could be explained in relation to genetic differences – the idea that human capacities were radically different between different nations or races – did not entirely die out: it also found new formulations within the naturalistic paradigms of the Enlightenment.

But minimalist humanity had another use: it could be used to speculate about the state of nature and natural rights. Hence it also influenced natural law debates and political philosophy, most clearly in Thomas Hobbes and those who reacted to him. Eventually, this discussion about the state of nature also contributed to the philosophical speculations about ‘natural man’ that were so central to many writers of the Enlightenment, in particular (as we have seen) Rousseau.

The speculations of Rousseau however also owed to another, softer version of primitivism, ‘the humanist myth of the Golden Age’, a time before private property, work, greed, or the necessity of laws. This humanist image, our third element, was directly influenced by the Greek and Latin poets, especially Ovid’s Metamorphoses. By contrast, its relation to image of Eden before the fall is less straightforward. We might call this nostalgic primitivism ‘Stoic’, because various Greek and Roman authors influenced by Stoicism understood following nature and living in austere simplicity in positive terms, and were keen to denounce the extent to which civilized life, especially life in cities, could lead to moral corruption, for example through excessive luxury. This Stoic tradition, best represented by Seneca’s letter XC but also by Plutarch (whom Rousseau read assiduously), often relied on a normative understanding of providential nature as apprehended by human reason, an objective moral order often expressed through the idea of natural law (a notion also articulated by Cicero in a number of influential passages), and should therefore be distinguished from the Epicurean (or Lucretian) model of the early history of civilization that I alluded to earlier, which depicted a process driven by necessity and chance, without any role for Providence or rationality. In Lucretius’ influential narrative, the solitary life of the first men was hard and resisted idealization, yet the progress of civilization was no less problematic; once the rudiments of communal (fire, housing, language, and the simplest arts) had been acquired, culminating in the natural leadership of primitive and heroic kings, degeneration quickly ensued, as men,

21 Hesiod and Aratus were the key sources amongst the Greeks, whom Ovid and Virgil largely echoed.

22 The normative character of the Stoic vision of the Golden Age of original simplicity is not to deny that to some extent its appeal was connected to an idealized account of the origins of the Roman Republic, a vision for example expressed by Livy, who understood Roman greatness as an outcome of its original austerity, and attributed its present troubles (at the turn of the first century) to a decline of morals brought about by luxury and greed.

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driven by ambition or greed, fell upon each other, making the institution of laws and private property necessary in order to curb this violence. Thus although the Epicurean and the Stoic agreed in considering human endeavour in civilized society as somewhat vain and in locating a happier, simpler period of moral innocence in a past before excessive wealth brought the corruption associated with property, authority and laws, Lucretius unlike Seneca rejected any Golden Age or the notion that right reason was located in the past, and embraced civilization as both inevitable and, to some extent, desirable.

As I have argued elsewhere, analysing Peter Martyr of Anghiera’s interpretation of the natives of Hispaniola discovered by Columbus as men living in a Golden Age (Anghiera was in fact the key early exponent of this image), it would be wrong to treat this as a simple projection of a classical theme without any basis on first-hand reports. The image of innocence was rooted on empirical descriptions of cultural simplicity and lack of property written by those same explorers and settlers who, having proclaimed their desire to convert those naked peoples to Christianity, very quickly proceeded to enslave them.

In any case, I would argue that this poetic but also to some extent ethnographic image of primitive simplicity was always challenged by the negative image of the savage as cannibal and idolater. A good example of the ambivalent play between these two sets of images can be represented by Vespucci: living according to nature was equivalent to living unconstrained by any laws, “like Epicureans”, hence the people of Brazil went naked, held all property in common, required no justice, recognized no kings, had no religion or faith, took as many women as they wished, and ate human flesh. However, after its paradoxical transformation by the Huguenot traveller Jean de Léry and, more decisively, by the Catholic moral critic Montaigne, even the cannibal contributed to the more libertine (and at heart Stoic or Epicurean) idea of a ‘natural man’ not corrupted by civilization, and hence happier and less hypocritical than modern European man. As Léry observed:

The elaborate attire, paint, wigs, curled hair, great ruffs, farthingales, robes upon robes, and all the infinity of trifles with which the women and girls over here disguise

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23 Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935) offer what is still the most systematic and compelling account of classical primitivism and anti-primitivism. Only occasionally I depart from their typology. The Greek sources for Stoic primitivism are to some extent lost, but it seems clear that authors like Seneca and Cicero were influenced by Posidonius. The parallels offered by Diodorus Siculus and his contemporary Lucretius suggest that there may have been a common basis for Stoic and Epicurean treatments of the subject in the first century BC, although with Seneca the divergence becomes explicit (see n.5 above).


25 Letter of July 1502 to Lorenzo di Perfrancesco di Medici. The published version, *Mundus Novus*, added sensationalism to this basic description, especially by graphic and obviously exxagerated depictions of promiscuous sex and generalized cannibalism, but kept its basic features.
themselves, and of which they never have enough, are beyond comparison the cause
of more ills than the ordinary nakedness of the savage women. This idea of savage innocence of course culminated in key texts of the French
Enlightenment about the ‘noble savage’, which often stood somewhere between
the ethnographic and the philosophical. The Baron de Lahontan, in his semi-
apocryphal account of his travels amongst the Hurons (Voyages...dans l’Amérique
Septentrionale, 1703; revised 1705), offered the clearest formulation of the way the
idea of natural equality became the key element in this idealization of the savage
as representing man as he should have stayed:

Ce sont des homes chez qui le Droit Naturel se trouve dans toute sa perfection. La nature
ne connoit point de distinction, ni de préeeminence, dans la fabrique des individual d’une meme espece, aussi somme-nous tous égaux...

This was a man whose nakedness was less sinful, whose sexual morality was less
repressive, whose religion was less absurd, and whose economic and political life
was more equal and less oppressive than in Europe. However, with Lahontan the
moral significance of the idea of innocence had been deeply transformed. With
Léry and Montaigne, it was the moral failings of European Christians, rather
then their way of life or their religion, that were being exposed by the rhetorical
consideration of the positive qualities of American Indians: in Montaigne’s
famous expression, “we can indeed call these people barbarians by the rules of
reason, but not in comparison with ourselves, who surpass them in every kind
of barbarism”. What Montaigne had not done was to question the traditional
contents of the rule of reason. By contrast, Lahontan’s anti-clericalism ensured
that it was no longer a Christian understanding of natural law that defined the
moral compass of savage innocence. Instead, a deistic type of natural religion
was associated with an idea of natural right that, against traditional Aristotelian
principles, altogether questioned the benefits of the fundamental institutions of
civilization, such as private property and the rule of law.

26 Jean de Léry, Histoire d’un voyage en terre de Brésil, ed. Frank Lestringant (Paris: Librarie
Générale Française, 1994), 234.

Baron de Lahontan, Dialogues curieux et Mémoires de l’Amérique Septentrionale, ed. Gilbert
Chinard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1931), 257. This statement was an addition
by the author of the 1705 revisions, Nicolas Gueudeville, who enhanced the radical edge of
Lahontan’s dialogues with the chief Adario. For a discussion of these alterations see Chinar’s
introduction, 29-44, and Aubrey Rosenberg, Nicolas Gueudeville and his Work (1652-172?) (The

(Hammondsworth, 1991), 236.

29 Interestingly, whilst the Golden Age theme was general to European humanistic culture, the
criticism of civilization and in particular of private property through the use of the savage was mostly a
French libertine theme, in contrast, for example, to the dominant trends in the British Enlightenment.
Our fourth and final element concerns the image of the *savage as colonial subject*. Here, however, it is important to emphasize that the colonial realities of European domination overseas, especially in the New World, did not generate a uniform image or single theme of the savage. On the contrary, various colonial contexts generated a number of debates, both within each imperial system and between them. As we have seen, the *apology of empire* often involved negative ethnological stereotypes, in particular, the use of the Aristotelian idiom by which barbarians became natural slaves, the use of the natural law tradition by which savages were ignorant men who committed crimes against natural law, or the use of the classical idiom by which savages were men living a primitive life ‘without any law’, that is, like beasts (what I have described as ‘minimalist humanity’). This classical repertoire was often supported by a Christian (Augustinian) Providentialist theme which insisted that savages were obviously great sinners whom God chose to punish (for example, by decimating them, as Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo suggested)\(^{30}\). By contrast, critics of colonialism presented the *Indian as victim*, in two modes, Catholic ‘Providential utopianism’, and the Protestant ‘Black Legend’\(^{31}\). It is however crucial to note that not all defence of empire was built upon negative stereotypes, and not all praise of savages was anti-colonial. Catholic Providential Utopianism, in the Franciscan or Jesuit mode, and in the writings of Las Casas, was still in the end little more than attenuated (religious) imperialism, often working to moderate the harsher realities of the colonies. Moreover, a positive image of native peoples was often mobilized in defence of colonization against metropolitan sceptics – hence, from Columbus in Spain to Thomas Harriot in England, the *capacity for civilization and Christianization* become important markers for the future subject (or even the future slave). In other words, promotional literature, Catholic or Protestant, was relatively pro-native.

### III. The problem: Hobbes’ fake American savages

This complex typology raises the question of whether the classical image of the Golden Age, and the subsequent libertine elaboration of the noble savage theme, had anything to do with speculations about the state of nature, or should be treated as an altogether separate paradigm. It is, in other words, important to disentangle with some precision the relation of the natural man of philosophers and philosophical historians to the noble savage myth, in particular the savage of libertine discourse of the early Enlightenment (best represented by Lahontan), which may be interpreted as a re-invention of the classical Golden Age to serve

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\(^{30}\) The negative image of the savages as sinners who lacked knowledge of natural law and therefore could be subjected or dispossessed was not exclusive to Spanish imperialist writers such as Oviedo or Sepúlveda, it also helped support colonialist policies in Protestant countries.

\(^{31}\) Notably, writers like Las Casas, Benzoni (especially through the illustrated edition by Theodore de Bry), and Montaigne. Arguably, the tradition culminated in the secular criticism of colonialism by Abbé Raynal and Diderot.
a moral debate, satirical or philosophical, about European Christianity and
civilization. Here I will seek to demonstrate that it is the negative theme of what
men are when stripped of civilization (that is, a hard primitivist paradigm devoid
of the myth of the Golden Age) that is most closely connected to the philosophical
idea of man in the state of nature, and hence to theories about the origins of civil
society. Moreover, I shall argue that whilst empirical ethnography of New World
(and, later, Pacific) savages was remarkably relevant to the elaboration of the
libertine myth, especially in the writings of Montaigne and Lahontan, the relation
between ethnography and speculative natural rights theory, too often taken for
granted, was highly problematic. I believe that the depth and sources of this tension
have to some extent been obscured by the fact that eighteenth century writers like
Rousseau and Diderot, who inherited both the libertine myth and the Hobbesian
thought experiment, were able to offer a synthesis between the two traditions.

From a modern philosophical perspective, perhaps the better known set
of images relates to the crucial role that the idea of man in a state of nature
played in the development of moral and political thought. We are all familiar
with Thomas Hobbes’ characterisation of the natural condition of mankind as
equivalent to a state of war, in which lack of security makes any industry or
civilization impossible, therefore human life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and
short”. The subsequent centrality of this image of a social and political contract
whose terms are defined speculatively on the basis of ideas of man living in
state of nature is pervasive in modern liberal consciousness, even though John
Locke, or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, wrote in very different contexts and aimed at
very different conclusions from those reached by Thomas Hobbes. Less clear in
the historiography, but in my opinion more important historically, is to assess
why and how this tradition originated. Simply comparing the treatment of the
image of natural man and his natural rights in these three major landmark
writers, in order to note that Hobbes sought to defend an extreme version of
absolute sovereignty, Locke, on the contrary, a moderate form of monarchy
where the executive powers of the state had to be conditional, and Rousseau,
most paradoxically, the idea of the alienation of human nature through the
same process of civilization that guaranteed sociability and property rights,
does not take us very far, unless we consider a broader cultural context.

Even though it was generally understood (by writers as diverse as Suárez,
Grotius and Locke) that human political and cultural realities were empirically
diverse and needed to be elucidated though historical research, the natural law
tradition treated the subject of the state of nature speculatively, not empirically.
One explanation is that this was a way of circumventing the Biblical account
of Creation and the Fall, without openly embracing atheism, as for example
Rousseau declared in one famous passage of the preface to his Second Discourse
in 1754\textsuperscript{32}. Arguably this problem had already been identified by the Renaissance

\textsuperscript{32} Rousseau, Discourses, 132. See also note 64 below.
ethnologist Johannes Boemus in 1519 by simply considering the clash between the classical and Christian accounts of the earliest history of mankind. However, there is a deeper issue here. In effect, whether in the late scholastic tradition, or in the modern Protestant natural law tradition, the idea of natural law and natural rights were derived from supposedly rational axioms, with empirical observations only playing a supplementary role. I am not sure it has been sufficiently emphasized that the results were not always compelling. Hobbes’ idea in Leviathan that “the savage people of many places in America (except the government of small families, the concord thereof dependeth on natural lust) have no government at all, and live at this day in that brutish manner as I said before”, for example, agrees with an image of utter barbarism that circulated in England in the seventeenth century, but is completely at odds with the more detailed and authoritative ethnographies of North America produced by English writers from Thomas Harriot to John Smith, narratives that emphasized a degree of civil order and even harmony amongst the savage nations, and which were widely publicized by Richard Hakluyt and Samuel Purchas. In the case of Hobbes we know that, in his capacity as tutor and secretary to Lord Cavendish, he became a shareholder and sat at the Courts of the Virginia Company between 1622 and 1624. Here he had the opportunity to personally meet Samuel Purchas, amongst others very well informed about the Algonquian tribes around Jamestown, so it is quite inconceivable that he would not have been aware of the tenor of this ethnographic discourse. It is true that after the great massacre of Virginia settlers in 1622 a more negative view of native savagism came to prevail than had been the case previously, but this (in any case amply provoked) aggression towards the English did not justify Hobbes’ assumptions about the lack of civil order and security (above the level of the family) within each native village or tribe. We could say that whilst Hobbes’ idea of a state of nature could conceivably claim a kind of scientific status purely as a model of what it would be like if men did not live under political authority, Hobbes was in fact tempted to argue, both in De Cive and in the Leviathan, that his account of ‘the natural state of men before they entered into society’ described the reality both of former ages amongst many nations (I think we can safely assume pre-Roman antiquity in Western Europe), and of the current life amongst many American Indians. In doing so Hobbes was not

33 I have analyzed Harriot’s rhetorical strategy in Joan-Pau Rubiés, “Texts, images and the perception of ‘savages’ in Early-Modern Europe: what we can learn from White and Harriot”, in European Visions, ed. Sloan, 120-130.


35 Hobbes’ “natural condition of mankind” is best understood to be an abstraction to explain what impels men to form society (namely fear of each other) rather than a description of historical time before the creation of political societies. For Hobbes ancient history was to begin with Biblical history, and his empirical examples were therefore modern American
inspired by his readings of travellers’ accounts, but took the classical paradigm as a starting point (possibly also influenced by his experience translating Thucydides), and forced modern ethnographic evidence to portray something quite different from what it often did. As revealed by the iconography of the title page of De Cive, Hobbes in effect subtly transformed the iconic status of the savage as a subject for potential civilization proposed by De Bry into an emblem of pure natural liberty opposed to civil society.

His methodological position, where rhetorical power may have been more important than any facts, is not too different from that of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda when, in a very different polemical context in Spain a century earlier, he insisted in defining the peoples of the New World as irrational and therefore natural slaves, abusing the Aristotelian definition. It is of course significant that, under pressure from the relatively well-informed Dominicans, the imperialist school of the Spanish debates about native rights was to a very large extent forced to retreat into a subtler condemnation of the Indians, usually on the grounds that in their idolatry, human sacrifices, cannibalism and (highly exaggerated) sodomy, they failed to follow some crucial commandments of natural law. There is no evidence to my knowledge that the Hobbesian sacrifice of ethnography to axiomatic theory suffered from an equivalent reaction from those better informed, given how secondary the issue of the native Americans and their rights was to the conclusions of his whole project. Indeed what seems most remarkable is the extent to which subsequent writers felt free to approach the subject in a similar manner, that is, building a political theory by reference to the speculative image of a previous state of nature. Whilst John Locke evidently read travel accounts with attention, taking notes for example from Jacques Sagard’s account of the Canadian Hurons, or Inca Garcilaso’s account of Peru, and used ethnographic evidence to challenge the idea that men were born with innate ideas, when representing the state of nature his main model was Hobbes’s preceding account.

savages, or savages in past centuries, rather than primitive men in the most distant past, sharing the equation of the American savage and the European ancient proposed in 1590 by John White and Thomas Harriot. Hence in De Cive: “One may easily see how incompatible perpetual war is with the preservation of the human race or of individual men. Yet a war that can not be brought to an end by victory because of the equality of the contestants is by its nature perpetual […] The present age presents an example of this in the Americans; past centuries show us nations, now civilized and flourishing, whose inhabitants were then few, savage, short lived, poor and mean”.

36 In his translation of Thucydides, Hobbes quickly encountered the famous passage on the origins of civil society in Greece, with its emphasis on a primitive nomadic existence marked by insecurity, and Attica’s paradoxical escape from faction and invasions thanks to the poverty of its soil. Hobbes might have also been influenced by Lucretius, whom he certainly read (possibly in the 1640s) in relation to his atomic materialism and his contacts with Gassendi. The possible influence of Lucretius on Hobbes merits more attention.

Therefore my leading hypothesis is that philosophical images of natural man understood as man before any social contract did not usually bear a direct relationship to images of actual savages, whether we are dealing with savages endowed with primitive virtues, or those living like animals and without knowledge of natural law or Revelation. That does not mean, however, that the notion of natural rights was the consequence of a purely speculative exercise. In fact the picture is more complex. We must consider, for example, Vitoria’s concern with the actual conquest of America and the fate suffered by the civilizations of Mexico and Peru as the source of his natural law arguments about just war and rights to liberty and property, or the influence that his thought on the matter exercised over Hugo Grotius. However, even if we grant that natural rights were in some cases an important concern, the extent to which a detailed ethnography of New World ‘barbarians’ or ‘savages’ affected these theoretical discussions is a different matter. Arguably, whilst the historiography on the Spanish overseas conquests, and the debate on the legitimacy of those conquests in terms of natural law, was often shaped by ethnographic research (this is especially the case in the writings of Las Casas), this ethnography only had a limited role in the formation of the philosophical idea of natural man. What the ethnography of particular groups of savage and civilized gentiles often did, from Hispaniola to the Philippines, was help decide the range of applicability of theoretical notions of right and nature within a political and ecclesiastical debate about conquest and mission.

Thomas Hobbes might have decided to ignore those accounts that emphasized that the savages of America were in many ways very civil; John Locke, by contrast, was (as we have seen) an avid reader of travel literature, and there can be some argument as to what extent his philosophical arguments relied on historical material. One line of interpretation suggests that the state of nature was meant to depict not how men are, but rather what rights and duties men have when placed by God in the world: not a primitive way of life in a secular historiography modelled on the classical account of the rise of civilization, but rather something all men carry within themselves as natural creatures prior to living in society (as they inevitably must). However, when it came to his philosophical arguments, there can be no doubt that Locke made a strong claim about the historical validity of his theories, an in particular his use of ‘savages’ was important in at least two respects. First, evidence from savages was crucial to questioning the thesis that moral ideas were innate, for example by attacking the classical principle that there existed a universal consensus about fundamental moral norms, including religious worship. Second, although Locke’s state of nature can be seen as primarily an elaboration of Hobbes’ account, he insisted that it was no mere fiction, and located the transition to civil

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government in pre-history. He acknowledged that the state of nature had become in modern times rare, because it was obviously inconvenient for men to live without society, and he also recognized that the evidence was scant, because pre-civil men kept no historical records (with the exception of the ancient Jews). However, he found sufficient evidence of the historicity of the process by which free and equal men came together to form a civil society in the accounts of the origins of European city-republics such as Venice and Rome, and in José de Acosta’s explanation of the way men in Peru used to live without government like the savages in Florida or Brazil. The savage nations of America also supported his claim that the first kings were only leaders elected for the purposes of warfare (hence the consensual nature of political power in the earliest societies was established). My point here is not simply to note that treating the state of nature of seventeenth-century political philosophers as deliberately a-historical contradicts the empirical claims made by Locke and, to some extent, also Hobbes; of equal significance is the fact that Locke’s reliance on Acosta stands as one clear example of the way the Spanish Jesuit’s classification of barbarians into degrees of civilization, combined with his assumption (in his account of the peopling of the New World) that in the beginning all Indian nations were nomadic savages, had transformed America into the privileged laboratory for the development of a kind of stadial theory for the history of gentile mankind.

The historical assumptions underlying the Renaissance model of the rise to civilization can be illustrated with reference to Johannes Boemus’ *Omnium gentes mores, ritus et leges* (Augsburg, 1520), the first comprehensive ethnological treatise of Renaissance Europe, and a work often reprinted and translated. As we have seen, Boemus (Böhm), a humanist cleric from Ulm, faced the difficulty of reconciling the biblical and classical accounts, deriving the latter from Diodorus Siculus. The philosophical account was of course objectionable, because it began with a spontaneous emergence of mankind from a combination of physical elements, without any providential intervention: there was no creation of Adam, not even a glimpse of an intelligent design. Yet obviously something about the history of the rise of civilization from a condition of beast-like savagism appealed to Boemus as plausible, although, inevitably, he felt compelled to declare the truth of the account given in *Genesis*. The signs of ambivalence, which led him to present both accounts for the reader to judge, are highly significant. In fact, Boemus managed to reach a synthesis by displacing the classical account of the rise of civilization at the time after the flood. Although primitive life, which was ‘rural, secure and idle’, echoed the theme of the Golden Age, Boemus’ dominant theme was the perfection and happiness of European civilization, compared with the simple, rude and uncivil life.

Daniel Carey discusses Locke’s selective use of travel accounts for the very different arguments of the *Two Treatises* (to illuminate the history of European civility) and the *Essay* (to question innate ideas) in Locke, Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. Contesting diversity in the Enlightenment and beyond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 69-97. The empirical validity of Locke’s state of nature is suggested in *Two Treatises of Government*, II, chapter 8 (including passages on Acosta and on elective monarchy).
of earlier times. The growth of civilization from a condition of gross barbarism had been driven by conflicts between men, economic needs and concern with security, and there could not be any doubt about the fact that the creation of laws and walled cities ensured civil peace and led mankind to historical progress:

And then they began to provide for their maintenance, not only by husbanding their grounds, or following their flocks, but by sundry other exercises and new invented arts, to pass by sea with their navies into foreign nations, first for transporting of companies to inhabit new-found countries, and then for traffic and trading with one another; to train up horses for the cart; of copper to make coin; to clothe themselves more curiously; to feed more daintily; to have more humanity in their speech, more civilities in their conversation, more state in their buildings, and in all points to be more mild, more wise, and better qualified: and laying aside all gross barbarism, and beastly cruelty, abstaining from mutual slaughter, from devouring of human flesh, from rapine and robbery, from open and incestuous couplings of children with their parents, before indifferently used, and from many more such enormities. They applied their reason and strength to recover the earth... and made it fertile and very delightful to behold.

Interestingly, Boemus’s image of man living in a state of utter incivility after the Flood, which we might describe as either neo-classical or proto-Hobbesian, was written with willful independence from the accounts of American savages by Vespucci, even though, given their wide circulation in Germany, Boemus must have at least heard rumors. In this first example of armchair humanist cosmography modern ethnography would confirm, rather than create, the image of pre-civil man underlying the classical history of the progress of civilization. Hence the Spanish translator of Boemus’ work in 1555, the humanist rhetorician Francisco de Thámara, was able to supplement Boemus’ account of the customs and religions of the peoples of Asia, Africa and Europe with those from “Las Indias y tierras nuevamente descubiertas”, directly adapting the ethnographic chapters recently published by imperialist historians of the Spanish conquest such as Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo and Francisco López de Gómara. Adhering to the contrasting images of barbarism and civilization developed by Boemus, Thámara

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41 More generally, Boemus’ declared aim was to offer a source of moral instruction through the compilation and comparison of human rites and customs.

42 Boemus, The manners, lawses and customes of all nations, translated by Ed. Aston (London, 1611), preface to the reader. I have used Aston’s English translation (which followed the Latin edition published in Lyons in 1604) because it is more faithful and clearer than the 1555 version by William Waterman. I have compared Aston’s rendering to the Latin of the second edition (using the Lyons edition of 1541).


44 Francisco Thámara, El libro de las costumbres de todas las gentes del mundo y de las Indias (Antwerp: Martín Nucio, 1556).
was content with an image of native savagery that made the Spanish conquest seem
part of a civilizing process, a restoration of human unity through both true religion
and the highest forms of civilization. This was therefore the humanist paradigm
in its imperialist version, which as Boemus had demonstrated, could be made
compatible with both the Biblical image of cultural and religious degeneration,
and with the classical alternative that emphasized the progress of civilization.
Humanist historians of the New World like José de Acosta thus had a powerful set
of assumptions from which to integrate a stadial history of New World barbarians
to the triumphant history of Christian civilization. Moreover, those writers who
in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sought to take the pre-civil state
of nature as the starting point for a historical hypothesis for the development of
human societies had a solution to the problem maintaining religious orthodoxy:
the state of nature was to be a relapse into bestiality from the rationality of Noah,
rather than an absolute beginning for mankind from animal origins.

Within the natural law tradition, the stadial theory (and the idea of a relapse)
received impetus in De jure naturae et gentium (1672) by Samuel Pufendorf, a
writer roughly coeval to John Locke. However, in his case this development was
largely driven by further theoretical considerations rather than the impact of any
historical or ethnographic evidence. As a matter of fact, here the state of nature was
explicitly declared to be a theoretical model. Against Hobbes’s sharp dichotomy
between man in nature and man in political society, Pufendorf placed his emphasis
on natural sociability as precisely the mechanism that could explain how the savage –
that is, man living in a state of natural freedom – formed communities
and became civilized. It was not however a natural sociability in the Aristotelian
sense of being instinctive, but rather it derived from self-preservation and selfish
calculations, given the peculiar nature of man: his vulnerability when socially
isolated, his infinite capacity for expanding needs, his perfectibility through
language and culture. All these led to society before the state was needed. In this
way Pufendorf, as Istvan Hont has emphasized, accepted Hobbes’s conjectural
method without accepting his conclusions, and he did so in order to be able to
reconstruct Grotius’ position as a modern reply to the sceptical attack on the
parochial assumptions of Aristotelian scholastics (it was Pufenforf, rather than
Grotius, who really perceived the relativist challenge posed by Montaigne and
Charron). As an alternative to Hobbes’ simple state of nature as a state of war,
he offered a conjectural history of civilization involving multiple acts of consent
that led both to a law of property and, through agriculture, to the various stages
of economic progress. It differed from the Jesuit Acosta’s influential definition of
various degrees of civilization because now the point was not to classify barbarians
(in order to rule and evangelize them), but rather to understand the mechanisms
of social transformation: a historical, rather than an ethnographic, question, and

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45 Istvan Hont, “The language of sociability and commerce: Samuel Pufendorf and the theoretical
foundations of the ‘four-stages’ theory”, in Id., Jealousy of Trade. International competition and the
far less empirical\textsuperscript{46}. In Pufendorf’s almost entirely conjectural theory, the state (\textit{civitas}) was only the eventual outcome of an economic process driven by selfish sociability, and only appeared when demographic growth, cultural sophistication, exaggerated consumption and commerce made it necessary. Through the wide reception of Pufendorf’s work, this conjectural history (one which perhaps, through Lucretius, was more Epicurean than has been understood, Pufendorf preferring to pretend that he was a Christian Stoic) would lead natural law to the philosophical histories of the Scottish Enlightenment\textsuperscript{47}.

It is possible that in this northern European tradition of the seventeenth century, where the state of nature served to explain how society and government could have possibly come about, rather than why they were, for rational men, a natural condition (as Thomist writers had assumed, following Aristotle), the casual way with which American and other savages could be presumed to live in that state, without laws or agriculture, was influenced by the fact that many of these writers wished to secure property rights in Europe whilst at the same time defending a European right to appropriate lands overseas (this was certainly

\textsuperscript{46} On the context and empirical foundations of Jesuit and other Catholic missionary classifications of degrees of civility in America and Asia, see J. P. Rubiés “The concept of gentile civilization in missionary discourse and its European reception: the \textit{Repúbicas del Mundo} by Jerónimo Román”, in \textit{Circulation des savoirs et missions d’évangélisation (XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)}. Charlotte de Castelnau, Ines Zuponov, and Aliocha Maldavski eds. (Madrid, forthcoming). By contrast, in the definition of the state of nature in his \textit{De jure naturae et gentium} (Book II, chapter 2) Pufendorf’s sources are generally those of a humanist antiquarian, especially ancient poets and historians – in this he was very similar to Grotius. The crucial discussion of the sceptical attack against the existence of natural law involved the evidence of diversity of opinions and customs in barbarian nations across the world, no less than Carneades’s famous argument of the primacy of utility, but Pufendorf relied on Montaigne and Charron for the point, rather than on primary ethnographic sources. Similarly, in his account of the origins of property as a series of contractual agreements from a default position of communal ownership (Book IV) Pufendorf also reied a great deal on classical sources rather than on modern savages, and the chapter involved an explicit reinterpretation of the Golden Age myth along anti-primitivist lines: it was the indolence and torpor of men in a state of nature that Ovid and Virgil had truly sought to portray, not an ideal lost age. This does not mean that Pufendorf was unaware of the rich ethnographic literature of the age, in fact he actually quoted various sources in his discussion of objects of property; my point is that his most distinctive arguments about the state of nature largely ignored modern ethnography. I have relied on the translation by Basil Kennett, \textit{Of the law of nature and nations} (1703).

\textsuperscript{47} Pufendorf’s classical sources of inspiration, and his Epicureanism in particular (which he also knew through Gassendi), deserve more attention. In the crucial chapter “Of the natural state of man” (Book II, chapter 2) Pufendorf supported his minimalist definition of natural man as man stripped of all human or religious rules and institutions, that is, without arts and culture and outside civil society, with extensive quotations from Lucretius, Diodorus Siculus (the same passage so crucial to Boemus) and a passage from Cicero’s \textit{Pro Sesto}. These accounts of the early history of civilization were all seen as equivalent, and led directly to a summary of Hobbes’s discussion of the state of nature (\textit{1703}, 80-1). Acting very much like Boemus 150 years earlier, Pufendorf felt obliged to declare that these accounts were untrue in the light of Biblical Revelation, although within their own logic they were valuable: “however fabulous these accounts appear, yet as far as the authors of them were in the right, that upon supposal of such an origin of mankind, the face of nature would have born all these features [...]”
one of Locke’s concerns). The extent to which North American tribes cultivated lands and lived peacefully in large communities (let alone their sophisticated understanding of rights to access to hunting grounds) was not therefore sufficiently appreciated.

IV. The foundations of the Enlightenment debate: savages, primitive mankind and the history of civilization

The modern natural law tradition of the seventeenth century was the starting point for Rousseau’s Second Discourse, and also the starting point for our second look at the significance of his contribution for the history of natural man. Rousseau’s key claim in the Second Discourse was that those modern political philosophers who had written of the state of nature in order to examine the origins of society had described the passions of civilized man, rather than those of savage man, projecting back the moral depravity of men driven by artificial desires. Adopting a hypothetical evolutionary premise (as we have seen of Lucretian inspiration) that placed natural man between the animals and civilized man, it was the exploration of distinctly primitive passions that made Rousseau’s contribution original, and which led him towards taking more seriously the ethnography of ‘negroes and savages’. His fundamental principles of self-preservation and pity had of course a clear genealogy in the minimalist principles explored in the modern natural law tradition; however, whilst self-preservation was distinctively familiar, Rousseau’s notion of an instinctive, pre-rational sympathy with the suffering of others, not only challenged Hobbes, but was also less utilitarian than the rational sociability of Grotius, Locke and, especially, Pufendorf. For Rousseau, human society was entirely conventional, and human perfectibility – a key notion in the contemporary understanding of the history of civilization – could certainly lead to the arts and sciences, but also to self-destruction.

48 Rousseau was also influenced by the notable discussion of anthropological unity and diversity in the recently published third volume of Buffon’s Histoire naturelle de l’homme (1749). However, the more evolutionary Des époques de la nature would only appear in 1778.

49 Rousseau’s notion of pity, or compassion, is defined in the Second Discourse as a “natural repugnance to seeing any sentient beings, and especially any beings like ourselves, perish or suffer”, and implies empathy to the extent that it is built upon an identification with the sufferings of others, a point made explicit in the discussion of commiseration (The Discourses, 153: it is reasoning that distances us from others, by engendering amour propre) and also in the Essay on the origin of languages. In the latter work however Rousseau was uncertain that “in the first times” man already had the imagination to ‘activate’ his natural feelings of pity, and his views of solitary men who “knowing nothing, feared everything, and attacked in order to defend themselves” seem more Hobbesian that those of the Second Discourse (see especially its ninth chapter: Rousseau, Discourses, 267-78). Rousseau’s problem was how to account for pity without the previous development of the imagination; as Adam Smith, one of his early readers, recognized, a fuller theory of sympathy was needed. Rousseau never revised the Essai for publication. In fact, with his many references to the Biblical account, these passages of the Essay may betray a first draft which he wisely put aside when he submitted the Second Discourse to the Dijon Academy.
Although Rousseau adopted the ethnography of modern savages as a valid indication of the primitive passions and physical conditions of natural man, his use of these sources was not methodologically sophisticated. For example, his description of the Hottentots (Khoikhoi) of South Africa, the emblematic savage who rejected civilization of his frontispiece, derived not from the best French (let alone German or Dutch) editions of Peter Kolb’s account (an excellent French translation by Jean Bernard had been published in 1741). Instead, Rousseau read the French version by Abbé Prévost in volume V of his ongoing *Histoire Générale des Voyages* (1746-59), in effect a translation of an English summary prepared by hack writer and cartographer John Green, alias Bradock Mead (c.1685-1757), for the *New General Collection of Voyages and Travels* published by Thomas Astley between 1745 and 1747. Astley’s collection was distinguished by systematically summarizing and re-arranging primary materials rather than by any sense of textual fidelity to the original. Green’s summary of Kolb’s account, in turn, was based on the idiosyncratic English translation by Guido Medley (1731), an obscure writer looking for the patronage of the President of the Royal Society Hans Sloane⁵⁰. Despite Rousseau’s casual reliance of what was available in an encyclopaedic synthesis of travels, suggesting a lack of concern for textual accuracy which removed him and many other *philosophes* from the humanist principles of an earlier antiquarian culture, he was influenced by the interpretative bias of his sources, as given by Prévost. Peter Kolb’s sympathetic account of the Hottentots was distinguished by challenging the negative stereotypes that prevailed in the majority of seventeenth-century accounts, although this emphasis had been slightly muted in the version offered in the *Histoire Générale des Voyages*⁵¹.

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⁵⁰ Peter Kolb, *The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope, or a particular account of the several nations of the Hottentots* (London: John Innys, 1731). The book was reprinted in 1738. Medley felt free to summarize and re-arrange the material, and despite praising Kolb for his factual accuracy, he introduced a more negative moral evaluation of the Hottentots (emphasizing especially their laziness) than is found for example in Jean Bernard’s French version (also abridged) published in 1741 (reprinted 1742 and 1743). Where Kolb worked as an ethnographer, for example in his attempt to explain the logic behind the Hottentots’ practice of infanticide, Medley simply wrote about their ignorance of natural law. This subtle editorial difference is symptomatic of the fact that, in general, English Protestant culture was more resistant to a positive image of the savages than French culture in this period.

Similarly, the Dominican father Jean Baptiste du Tertres’s account of the Caribs, published in 1667 in his landmark natural history of the French Antilles, was cast in the idealizing virtuous savage tradition, albeit from a Christian Stoic perspective, rather than the libertine position represented by Lahontan. It is worth considering the rhetorical power of du Tertre’s image, which was accompanied by a classicizing engraved figure of the Carib and his wife that echoed Jean de Léry’s iconic representations of the Tupinamba (figure 2):

in truth our savages are savages in name only, just like the plants and fruits which nature produces without any cultivation in the forests and wilderness; which, although we call them wild, nevertheless possess their genuine virtues and properties of strength and full vigour, which we so often corrupt by our artifice, and change so much, when we plant them in our gardens.

This simile between natural men and plants, with their simple virtues of strength and vigour, and their artificial opposites, was complemented by an image of the human quality of sociability in a world of almost perfect social equality:

The savages of these islands are the most content, the happiest and least corrupted by vice, the most sociable, the least deformed, and the least tormented by illness, of all the nations of the world. This is because they are such as nature produced them, that is to say, with great simplicity and natural naivety: they are all equals, so that they do not know almost of any kind of superiority or servitude [...] nobody is richer or poorer than his companion, and all, with perfect unanimity, direct their desires to that which is useful and strictly necessary, despising everything which they consider superfluous as a thing nor worth possessing.

The life of this savage was also undoubtedly happy and healthy. They were indolent but not without a perfect intelligence, offering a direct and systematic challenge to current images of irrationality, cruelty, deformity and bestiality. A vague Christian paternalism of long pedigree amongst Catholic missionaries underlay this account: those savages could be brought to embrace Christianity, if only the French colonists who called themselves Christian provided a better moral example, and the French

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52 Jean-Baptiste du Tertre, Histoire Générale des Antilles habitées par les Français, 2, vols. (Paris: Tomas Joly 1667). A preliminary version had been published in a rush in 1654, and was plagiarized by Sieur de la Rochefort (a Protestant minister in Rotterdam) for his own Histoire Naturelle des Antilles de l’Amérique (1658), if we are to believe an indignant du Tertre. Hence the 1667 edition was published in a polemical context. A third volume, with further details of the recent history of the French colony, was published subsequently in 1671. Volume II of 1667, “Contenant l’Histoire Naturelle”, is the relevant one for the ethnographic chapters, which offered a detailed treatment of three distinct groups: the natural inhabitants (book VII, 356-419), the French colonists (book VII, 419-482), and the Black slaves (book VIII, 483-539).


54 du Tertre, Histoire Générale des Antilles, II, 357.
colonial Governors offered more support to the missions. The frontispiece of the work evoked the possibility of a positive exchange between the civilized and the savage, by which the former gave technology and learning, the latter natural products, with the promise of conversion in the background.

Fig. 2 Jean Baptiste du Tertre, Histoire Générale des Antilles (Paris, 1667), vol. II, p. 356. Reproduced by kind permission of the University of Cambridge Library.

55 du Tertre, Histoire Générale des Antilles, II, 414-15. Chapter 13 of the treaty on the savages of the French Antilles was devoted to "Des obstacles qui se rencontrent à la conversion des sauvages". The evolution of the image of the Carib is discussed in the documentary anthology Wild Majesty. Encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the present day, eds. Peter Hulme and Neil L. Whitehead (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1992).
It is difficult to assess the extent to which these passages inspired, rather than simply corroborated, Rousseau’s ideas about natural compassion, and his positive image of the life of the savage as fundamentally happy. There is an important gulf separating du Tertre’s emphasis on the full humanity and sociability of the savages and Rousseau’s natural man, who was solitary and close to an animal (albeit this was not, for Rousseau, a bad thing in itself). But this is precisely why Rousseau understood these savages as a step removed from natural men. It is, in any case, quite clear that Rousseau’s approach involved a re-appropriation of the attack on the artificiality and, indeed, moral corruption of civilization that he found in his ethnographic sources. The theme had been, originally, a late Stoic elaboration of the Golden Age myth; later, with Jean de Léry, a Protestant theme about the moral failings of supposed Christians, a treatment which found its Catholic counterpart in missionary writers like father du Tertre, slightly more optimistic about the possibility of redemption; and after Montaigne, a sceptic, potentially libertine denunciation of how reason and civilization can lead us astray. This latter tradition had culminated in Lahontan’s dialogues, especially in the radical version by Nicolas Gueudeville, yet despite their very similar concern with natural liberty and equality, and their parallel attack on private property, it remains unclear whether Rousseau actually read them.

The distance between Rousseau and Montaigne is significant of the fact that with Rousseau (as also with Diderot, albeit with a different interpretation) we witness a coming together of the ethnographic savage of the libertines and the speculative state of nature of political theorists, rather than the triumph of the former over the latter. With his natural man Rousseau offered a substantive

56 For a discussion of this insoluble problem see Chinard in Lahontan, Dialogues curieux, 67. By contrast, Réal Ouellet argues that Rousseau and Diderot never read Lahontan and only knew his name by fame, and that any thematic similarities reflect their popularization: Lahontan, Oeuvres complètes, II vols. (Montreal: Les Presses de L’Université de Montréal, 1990), “Introduction”, 179-82. It is worth noting that Gueudeville was also the author of a number of dissertations which spoke positively about the savages in the relevant volume on America and Africa of the Atlas Historique (7 vols. 1705-20) commissioned by the Amsterdam publishers François Honoré et Compagnie, a work of reference and synthesis meant for a popular audience which, through Gueudeville, acquired a notorious radical edge. The relevant dissertation is found in volume VI, first published in 1719, and is notable among other things for offering a positive and revisionist interpretation of the Hottentots, ahead of the circulation of Peter Kolb’s account in Dutch, French and English versions.

57 As revealed by Rousseau in his Confessions, Diderot had actually intervened in the Second Discourse, before their friendship broke down. Although sceptical about Rousseau’s speculative image of natural man as solitary and ‘good’, and a great believer in the law of nature as a rational principle that led to sociability, Diderot shared the sense that modern savages were very much like primitive men (this is especially clear in his contributions to Raynal’s Histoire des deux Indes). Hence, the modern ethnography of savages helped understand the origins and foundations of society, and in particular the anti-natural and often pernicious character of the institutions and moral order of the civilized. For a discussion see Yves Benot, Diderot: de l’athéisme à l’anticolonialisme (Paris: Maspero, 1970); Michèle Duchet, Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières (Paris: Maspero, 1971), 407-73; Robert Wokler, “The influence of Diderot on the political theory of Rousseau”, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 132 (1975), 55-111.
criticism of civilization, despite a ‘no return’ bottom line – it would indeed be futile to attempt to go back to a simpler primitive life (but of course, as we have seen, this had also been the Stoic position). What was novel was his insistence that political philosophy and in particular the idea of natural law could be illuminated by a new understanding of natural man. Rousseau’s natural man, detached from any biblical myth, was pre-historic and speculative, and served as a tool for political thought, for example for questioning rights to property and re-thinking the legitimacy of the state, in direct dialogue with the earlier contributions of Hobbes and others. Rousseau, in effect, offered a critique of Hobbes whilst developing his model of a conventional social contract, and he did so by relying on the type of Stoic primitivism that Montaigne, exploiting the ethnography of modern savages, had transformed into an attack upon the claims of human reason. Montaigne, however, had never been engaged in a political argument of a Hobbesian kind. He had offered a relativist and cautious questioning of the rationalist arrogance of the men of his own society, espousing no cultural changes, but asking for humility and tolerance from those who blindly thought of themselves as civilized. His natural man, displaying a ‘naïveté originelle’ of Stoic inspiration, was not pursued beyond what he saw in the Brazilian cannibals, that is actual savages, in a truly ethnographic fashion, and there was no attempt to engage with the classical account of the early history of civilization (although Montaigne had read and annotated Lucretius). It was not how men became civilized that preoccupied him, but rather the difficulty and indeed vanity of human attempts to live according to right reason, the fact that ‘our laws’ have distanced us from those natural laws under whose command the savages who lack our goods and our vices still live.

Rousseau’s speculative efforts represented a partial historicization of the state of nature, although in practical terms his views were seen as no less ideological and speculative than those of his predecessors in the natural law tradition. It was his equation of natural man with a solitary animal that truly struck his contemporaries, rather than his occasional and supplementary use of ethnography, and future critics did feel the need to neutralize any specific experiments with solitary wild men or children found in the forests. But

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58 For Seneca to seek natural simplicity was a supreme form of virtue, but he did not seek a return to mere animal instincts. For Rousseau such going back was in any case a tragic impossibility, although there remained some hope that one could educate children according to their best natural instincts.

59 Le Brésil de Montaigne. Le Nouveau Monde des “Essais” 1580-1592, ed. Frank Lestringant (Paris: Éditions Chandeigne, 2005), 102. Lestringant (ibid. 235-8) sees Rousseau as a natural successor to Montaigne, but the evidence for any direct influence of the essays on the Second Discourse is limited, by contrast with the clarity of such an influence in the previous Discourse on the arts and sciences (1750). Diderot’s contemporary articles on cannibals and savages in the Encyclopédie (1751) also reveal the influence of Montaigne, together with those of missionaries such as fathers du Tertre and Charlevoix.

60 Ferguson, for example, in his Essay on the History of Civil Society (1767), denied the scientific validity of studying such wild men because they were not representative. Nevertheless
Rousseau also defined the terms of the future debate as an exercise in historical reconstruction, and his fine gradation from a solitary man who might look like an orang-utan, through the savage of modern ethnography, to the various stages from barbarism to human civilization, transformed the basic rhetorical opposition between natural man and civilized man into an analysis of the various stages through which a perfectible animal, by becoming free, rational and social, also became moral, and morally corrupt. (The fact that this finer gradation underlies his more general opposition is the reason why natural man sometimes seems interchangeable with the savage, sometimes is distinguished from it, creating considerable confusion)\(^61\).

It is therefore highly significant that Adam Ferguson, one of Rousseau’s most decisive critics, found a reply against both Rousseau and Hobbes, now paired for their speculative bent, precisely in a fuller historicization of the theme of the transition from rudeness to civilization\(^62\). The secular model of speculative history was not in itself questioned. The problem of course was that the history of primitive peoples was, as such, impossible to write. For this reason, it is not surprising that Ferguson took the avenue left open to him, relying on the ethnography of savages as an empirical source for the natural historical depiction of early mankind. The old antiquarian insight displayed in De Bry’s publication of Harriot’s account of Virginia, by which the European ancient was equivalent to the modern primitive, now received its full theoretical justification: in the same way that natural historians rely on present observations to depict any species, so must the anthropologist concerned with the character of man (as an animal and intellectual being) take account of the facts. This triumph of ‘scientific’ ethnography was however predicated on the assumption of most eighteenth-century natural historians that species were stable, an assumption which of course was derailed not many decades later, between Buffon and Darwin.

\(^61\) There is some controversy about whether Rousseau’s discussion of apes as possible natural men in his famous note X implied an argument about evolution from animal origins. For the latter interpretation see Robert Wokler, “Perfectible apes in decadent cultures: Rousseau’s anthropology revisited”, *Daedalus*, 107 (1978): 107-134. This has been questioned for missing the crucial point that for Rousseau apes were not assumed to be a distinct species, but possibly men. See in this respect Victor Gourevitch, “Rousseau’s ‘pure’ state of nature”, and Francis Moran III, “Between primates and primitives: Natural man in Rousseau’s Second Discourse” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 54, 1 (January 1993): 37-58.

There always remained however an alternative tradition of the history of the rise of civilization, one far more concerned with religious orthodoxy. As we have seen, the crucial contribution of humanist armchair writers like Johannes Boemus to the early-modern perspective on primitivism had been to synthesize the Biblical story of geographical dispersion and religious degeneration with the classical account of the origins of civilization, based on the dichotomy between the savage and the civilized. Throughout the seventeenth century, a number of antiquarian scholars, Catholic or Protestant, battled with the issue of how to fit the records of gentile history with the genealogies and chronologies found in Genesis, often resorting to diffusionist theories; however, they also relied on the idea of the basic comparability of the ancient primitive with the modern savage, a principle also established by the late sixteenth century, and the two methods, genealogical and comparative, were often seen as complementary, as exemplified by the Jesuit Joseph-François Lafitau in his efforts to rescue the orthodox religious vision from the dangers of libertinism (Lahontan being one of his targets)\(^63\). At the height of the Enlightenment, the type of synthesis proposed by Boemus remained relevant, and the problem of reconciling these two kinds of narratives continued to preoccupy Rousseau when he wrote his *Essay on the origin of languages*, although his *Second Discourse* cleverly dispensed with the biblical story by avowedly renouncing a fully empirical history\(^64\). The more conservative approach is exemplified by Rousseau's contemporary Antoine-Yves Goguet, a worthy successor to Bossuet who, pre-empting the libertine attack on Biblical authority developed by the likes of Voltaire, embraced modern travel accounts as the perfect empirical supplement to Genesis, in effect renewing the antiquarian strategy first developed with remarkable success by Jesuit historians of the New World, from Acosta to Lafitau\(^65\).

The fresh ethnographic impulse the eighteenth century prompts a reflection on the peculiar position of the modern natural law tradition (in effect a fundamental branch of political philosophy) in the history of the rise of natural man. The tradition that culminated in Pufendorf adopted a view of the state of nature that was particularly, perhaps even wilfully blind to modern ethnographic evidence, whilst following closely the Lucretian model of the

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\(^{64}\) Rousseau, *The Discourses*, 269-71, for his uncomfortable attempts to fit the stories Cain and Abel, Adam, the tower of Babel, and Noah, in his hypothesis about the progress from pre-linguistic savagism to barbarism, and from the latter to civilization and agriculture. Rousseau's declaration that he will dispense with the facts in the preface to the *Second Discourse* obviously refers to the Biblical narrative of origins, which he did not wish to openly question, and can not be taken as an argument for the view that his speculative account of the state of nature was never meant to be in some way historically valid.

\(^{65}\) Goguet, *De l’origine des loix, des arts et des sciences*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1758). John Pocock has recently (2005) emphasized the influence of Goguet in writers such as Gibbon.
rise of civilization in a process driven by necessity (although this Epicurean influence could not be proclaimed too openly for fear of offending religious sensibilities). By contrast, the libertine tradition of moral relativism, which in reality was more critical of European moral arrogance than genuinely relativist, embraced the evidence of travel accounts about savages and let it play against existing Stoic notions of Golden Age moral simplicity, and Christian ideas about innocence (often cultivated by missionaries), although the latter theme was, from an Augustinian perspective that emphasized original sin, a more problematic undertaking. In the 1750s, the modern philosophical and naturalistic ethnographic traditions were to come together in a variety of contexts: through renewed antiquarian apologies of the old Biblical paradigm such as Goguet’s, through Rousseau’s unique and radical critique of the cultural assumptions of the modern philosophers, and through those Scottish philosophical historians who rejected his radical approach and preferred to update the legacy of Pufendorf and Mandeville, distinguishing various stages and focusing on the mechanisms by which civility developed alongside the economy.

Inevitably, these various alternatives had political implications. I have sought to distinguish the role of three elements in the early-modern history of natural man: classical primitivism, with its often under-appreciated theory of the origins of civilization; ‘modern’ ethnographies of savages (more or less fictionalized), with their increasingly appreciated complexity; and theories of natural law, natural rights and the state of nature. The latter theories constituted in some respects a self-contained debate within a theological, juridical and eventually philosophical tradition mainly concerned with legitimizing political and civil power in European contexts, but often bore upon the question of the legitimacy of conquering barbarians or settling their lands, and had enormous implications for the emergence of a theory of universal rights in modern political thought. Although the uses of ethnography could be limited and highly selective, this political debate was at some crucial points either inspired, or informed, by empirical ethnographies of savages in America, Africa and the Pacific. Indeed, the plausibility of any social contract theory and, indeed, of any speculative history of civilization, now depended, to a remarkable degree, on the plausibility of its ethnographic support.

Nevertheless, such ethnographies of savages (no less than the classical accounts of the origins of civilization) could be rather ambivalent in their assessment of the extent to which civilization involved moral progress from the savage condition or, rather, a moral loss, however partial. Any answer involved solving additional questions about the point where the three elements of this complex story met, that is, the point at which natural man ceased to be simply natural man: could humans be fully human – by which rational and moral was implied - without being to some extent civilized? Could they have rights before being fully civilized? And at which point was natural man no longer natural man, but
a mere savage at the bottom of a ladder that led towards a global civilization? Of course, given the context of early modern colonialism, in the background there was always another question: what were the rights of the more civilized nations to conquer savages or settle amongst them? The sixteenth century answer was conditioned by Christian universalism and was inevitably yes, Europeans have such a right, although one might deplore the manner in which the conquest of barbarians was being conducted. However, as the religious discourse of European Christendom became questioned within Europe, and as Europeans demonstrated their technological superiority in a variety of encounters, the issue reverted to a simpler question of whether secular civilization was such a good thing, and could be imposed without embarrassment⁶⁶.

⁶⁶ This essay is an extract from a section of my forthcoming monograph Europe’s New Worlds. Travel Writing and the Origins of the Enlightenment. I am grateful to Guido Abbattista for the opportunity to include it within his stimulating project Facing otherness, and to Istvan Hont for his valuable comments.