Rousseau's Noble Savage and European Self-Consciousness

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I

Critical interpretations of Rousseau have commonly characterized him as either a revolutionary or a conservative romantic. The first interpretation, linking him with the French revolution, has generally seen him as a contributor to the development of a revolutionary consciousness and specifically as having been:

looked upon by many French revolutionary leaders and their spiritual descendants as the intellectual defender of the “liberty, equality, and fraternity” which became the slogan of those who overthrew the ancient monarchy . . .

The other interpretation of Rousseau as conservative-romantic has focused on his critique of the Enlightenment. The Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts has lent itself to this, for there Rousseau attacked the Enlightenment from the perspective of the ancient world and its civic virtues. The main inspiration for this interpretation, however, has been the Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men or the Second Discourse in which Rousseau treated the theme of the “noble savage” as a contrasting archetype to the “enlightened” European.

Since the very beginnings of a European self-consciousness, some notion of “otherness,” even including an idea of a “noble savage,” had been present; therefore, it would not be correct to say that Rousseau created this idea. Still, he seemed to have addressed himself specifically in the Second Discourse to those Europeans who did take for granted the superiority of European civilization and for whom, one presumes, “savage” was a pejorative term. After all, Rousseau wrote both the First and Second Discourses for prize essay contests held by the Academy of Dijon, a citadel of the Enlightenment. As the earlier formulations of the idea of a “noble savage” were mythical, adherents of the principles of the Enlightenment were probably given to doubt such an idea as a relic of past ages of “Unreason.” More generally the very core of the Enlightenment was unquestioning acceptance of and faith in “civilization.” It was in this attitudinal milieu that Rousseau reintroduced the “noble savage.”

We hope to acquire a better understanding of Rousseau’s intention in reviving this theme by attempting to recreate the kinds of reactions which his contemporaries were likely to have had; our argument is that Rousseau intended to bring about a new
psychological condition in Europe and that contrary to having conservative romantic goals he tried to create a revolutionary consciousness that would not, in the final analysis, be directed back in time but forward. In what follows we will attempt to show that:

1. Rousseau duplicated for his European readers the experiences of travelers to “savage” lands who overcame their prejudices about European superiority;

2. In the instance of the traveler’s report which inspired the frontispiece, Rousseau’s documentary style raises questions about the basis in truth of the praise of savagery and suggests that Rousseau may well have deliberately replaced one stereotype for another;

3. the new stereotype undermined European self-esteem, contributing to the creation of an audience not only longing for a lost past but as well ready for a revolutionary future.

II

Rousseau’s contemporaries, having opened the Second Discourse, would have encountered a title page opposed by an engraving. Rather than a portrait of the author or (as was presented as the frontispiece to the First Discourse) a depiction of classical mythical characters, this engraving was instead one which showed several humans interacting. Immediately Rousseau’s readers would have been confronted with a juxtaposition of European civilization and savagery. If one looks at the engraving one sees standing in the center a figure who, from his rough, scanty clothing and unkempt hair, is clearly identifiable as a “savage” or “barbarian.” To his right are several figures recognizable as Europeans from their clothing; one of them is seated, the rest standing behind. The seated one appears pensive, as though seriously considering the words spoken by the semi-clad figure. The substance of his speech is suggested by the caption below, “He goes back to his equals.” Pointing with his left hand from his present location and towards a group of savages dimly visible, the semi-clad figure seems to be rejecting European civilization in favor of a return to a condition of equality to be found with other savages. Thus, in their first encounter with the Second Discourse, the Europeans would have found not simply a juxtaposition of European civilization and savagery but as well denigration of the former in the name of the latter.

The inspiration for the engraving seems to have come from a report which Rousseau found in Histoire des voyages. He quoted this source in footnote (p) of the Discourse:

... I shall be content to cite a single, well-authenticated example which I offer for the examination of admirers of European civilization.

“All the efforts of the Dutch missionaries at the Cape of Good Hope have never been able to convert a single Hottentot. Van der Stel, governor of the Cape, having taken one from infancy, had him raised in the principles of the Christian religion and in the practice of European customs. He was richly dressed, he was taught several languages, and his progress corresponded very well to the cares taken for his education. The governor, placing great hopes in his intelligence, sent him to the Indies with a general commissioner. A few days after his return, during a visit he paid to some of his Hottentot relatives, he made the decision to divest himself of his European finery in order to clothe himself in a sheepskin. He returned to the fort in this new garb, carrying a package which contained his old clothes; and presenting them to the governor, he made this speech: Be so kind,
sir, as to understand that I renounce this paraphernalia forever; I renounce also for my entire life the Christian religion; my resolution is to live and die in the religion, ways, and customs of my ancestors. The sole favor I ask of you is to let me keep the necklace and cutlass I am wearing; I shall keep them for love of you. Immediately, without awaiting Van der Stel's reply, he escaped by running away, and he was never seen again at the Cape."

Histoire des voyages (Vol. 5, p. 175). 6

Rousseau's readers, having seen simply the engraving, would not yet have had all this information from footnote (p), the reference to which does not appear until the second part of the text. 8 We quote this now because it sensitizes one to subtleties in the frontispiece. The tone of the story Rousseau recounted is implicitly sympathetic, as though written by one not at all disturbed by the savage's repudiation of European civilization. If the frontispiece is the pictorial equivalent of the "well-authenticated" example in footnote (p), then Rousseau's intention in the frontispiece might have been to paint a sympathetic picture of a savage who rejected Europe in favor of an egalitarian and savage community. If only because of the lack of an explicit condemnation of the savage's choice, the readers may have been tempted to conclude from the frontispiece that Rousseau sympathized with the pictured savage. 10

If this were the conclusion drawn by the readers from the frontispiece, however, they, as admirers of European civilization, probably would not yet have sympathized with the savage. On the contrary, their opinion about the savage would have more probably been precisely that he is savage, that he perhaps chose to go back to his former life because he could not excel in European civilization. Merely his choice of savagery over European civilization would have been, to the reader, no proof of the superiority of the former to the latter. That Rousseau's readers would not yet have shared Rousseau's apparent praise of the pictured savage is clear when the general climate of opinion at that time about savages is taken into account. There were still in the air the medieval stereotypical conceptions of savages as "wild men" and cannibals. Also, individuals from exotic lands were beginning to be brought to Europe to serve primarily as entertainers. Uprooted from their native lands and thrust into an utterly alien milieu, they were seen as exotic curiosities, less than "civilized." 11

The Second Discourse made its first appearance in such an attitudinal context; in that context the frontispiece, with its implicit sympathy for the savage's choice, would have been shocking. The text of the Discourse might have been designed in part to transform this shock into a new positive conception, though perhaps still stereotypical one, of the savage. The new image was one of the superiority of the savage. Rousseau unfavorably compared his contemporary European civilization to savagery along two dimensions, a physical and a moral one. The Second Discourse was a history of the development of civilization out of a two-staged condition of savagery. In Part One Rousseau gave a speculative account of the pure state of nature, a pre-societal condition of savagery; in Part Two he described savages living in societies. The account of the second is less speculative than the former, since Rousseau was able to rely on actual observations of savage peoples existing at that time. Rousseau also seems to have used these observations as a guide for the speculations about the first savage condition, suggesting that although the two conditions of savagery differ importantly, they are quite similar when compared to Europe. Part One contains a passage in which...
Rousseau compared civilized men to presocietal savages with respect to strength and agility.

The savage man’s body being the only implement he knows, he employs it for various uses of which, through lack of training, our bodies are incapable; our industry deprives us of the strength and agility that necessity obliges him to acquire. If he had an axe, would his wrist break such strong branches? If he had a sling, would he throw a stone so hard? If he had a ladder, would he run so fast? Give civilized man time to assemble all his machines around him and there can be no doubt that he will easily overcome savage man. But if you want to see an even more unequal fight, put them, naked and disarmed, face to face, and you will soon recognize the advantage of constantly having all of one’s strength at one’s disposal, or always being ready for any event, and of always carrying oneself, so to speak, entirely with one (f).

If the European were in the savage milieu and stripped of his paraphernalia, his natural strength and agility would be less than that of the savage (either presocietal or societal as footnote (f), analyzed below, made clear). Rousseau’s analysis undercut the pride which Europeans no doubt felt in their capability to physically overwhelm peoples who were technologically deficient. Such capability was manifest in the European colonial enterprises. While it may have been the case that efforts to civilize savages were failures, as footnote (p) suggested, efforts to conquer them were not. Rousseau showed that these successes could be attributed to purely technological superiority which also had great costs. Because it lessened the need for exercise of physical faculties which tend to wane from lack of use, technological superiority entailed natural physical inferiority of the Europeans vis-à-vis savages. Thus, the admirers of European civilization learned from Rousseau that the rise of civilization was concomitant with a decline in the physical vigor of the species.

In Rousseau’s footnote (f), to which he referred in this passage, one finds a report describing the natural physical superiority of savages; the central part is an account of a European who was physically bested by a savage when technological differences were made irrelevant:

“The Hottentots,” said Kolben, “understand fishing better than the Europeans of the Cape. They are equally skilled with net, hook, and barb, in coves as well as in rivers. They catch fish by hand no less skillfully. They are incomparably dextrous at swimming. Their manner of swimming has something surprising about it, which is altogether peculiar to them. They swim with their body upright and their hands stretched out of the water, so that they appear to be walking on land. In the greatest agitation of the sea, when the waves form so many mountains, they somehow dance on the crest of the waves, rising and falling like a piece of cork.”

“The Hottentots,” the same author says further, “have surprising dexterity at hunting and the nimbleness of their running surpasses the imagination.” He is amazed that they do not more often put their agility to bad use, which sometimes happens, however, as can be judged from the example he gives. “A Dutch sailor, disembarking at the Cape,” he says, “engaged a Hottentot to follow him to the city with a roll of tobacco weighing about twenty pounds. When they were both at some distance from the crew, the Hottentot asked the sailor if he knew how to run. Run? answered the Dutchman; yes, very well. Let us see, replied the African; and fleeing with the tobacco, he disappeared almost immediately. The sailor, astonished
by such marvelous speed, did not think of chasing him, and he never again saw either his tobacco or his porter."

“They have such quick sight and such a sure hand that Europeans cannot come close to them. At a hundred paces they will hit a mark the size of a half-penny with a stone; and what is more astonishing, instead of fixing their eyes on the target, as we do, they make continuous movements and contortions. It seems that their stone is carried by an invisible hand.”

This description of societal savages was intended to empirically support the speculations in the text about presocietal savages’ natural physical superiority. Rousseau was not simply arguing that the Europeans were the natural physical inferiors of hypothetically constructed presocietal savages; he made it clear that there were living examples of naturally physically superior savages. Additionally to the argument about physical dimension, this descriptive material in (f) attributed to savages a kind of cleverness or cunning, as is evident in the case of the Dutch sailor who was robbed.

The treatment of savagery up to this point no doubt provoked in Rousseau’s readers an astonishment at such extraordinary feats. Comparisons thus far, however, would not likely have yet made the European reader simply an admirer of the savage if only because the kinds of feats attributed to savages were more probably seen as amusing by Rousseau’s readers than really admirable or worthy of imitation. The comparison more likely to make the reader an admirer of savagery was one along the moral dimensions. Because of Rousseau’s attribution of natural compassion or pity, the presocietal condition of savagery appears in his speculations to have been characterized by less division and conflict than that among civilized men from whom such compassion had been alienated. That savage, according to Rousseau, was naturally good, whereas civilized man, in order to be good to the extent that he was, required the forces of convention and elaborate systems of rules and punishment, both divine and human; Rousseau’s account suggested that even with all this conventional moral paraphernalia, the European was still the moral inferior of the savage, for convention did not provide an adequate substitute for natural pity.

In Part Two Rousseau directed his attention to a history of social life, beginning with an account of the societal savage and ending with his contemporary Europe. Paradoxically, with developed social relations anti-social behavior increased, for new conditions caused vanity, contempt, and envy, passions more divisive than were the simple impulses of the presocietal savage for self preservation. Because of these new passions, Rousseau argued that:

. . . the beginning of society and the relations already established among men required in them qualities different from those they derived from their primitive constitution; that, morality beginning to be introduced into human actions, and each man, prior to laws, being sole judge and avenger of the offenses he had received, the goodness suitable for the pure state of nature was no longer that which suited nascent society; that it was necessary for punishments to become more severe as the occasions for offense became more frequent; and that it was up to the terror of revenge to take the place of the restraint of laws.

Still, in Rousseau’s account, the societal savage was the moral superior of civilized man:

. . . nothing is so gentle as man in his primitive state when, placed by nature at equal distances from the stupidity of brutes and the fatal enlightenment of civil man, and limited equally by in-
distinct and reason to protecting himself from the harm that threatens him, he is restrained by natural pity from harming anyone himself, and nothing leads him to do so even after he has received harm.\textsuperscript{17}

Rousseau's praise of societal savagery over European civilization, exuberant in the extreme, reached the claim that:

\ldots this period of the development of human faculties, maintaining a golden mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of our vanity, must have been the happiest and more durable epoch. The more one thinks about it, the more one finds that this state was the least subject to revolutions, the best for man (p), and that he must have come out of it only by some fatal accident, which for the common good ought never to have happened.\textsuperscript{18}

All of subsequent history, then, including Rousseau's contemporary Europe, was depicted as a decline.

\ldots all subsequent progress has been in appearance so many steps toward the perfection of the individual, and in fact toward the decrepitude of the species.\textsuperscript{19}

Rousseau referred in this context to footnote (p), where he considered the vain efforts by Europeans to civilize savages. Europeans were prone to explain such failures by alleged incapacities of savages to appreciate what they rejected. As a final answer to any such deprecating apologies, Rousseau cited the "well-authenticated example" which provides the context for the frontispiece. With all that had intervened between the frontispiece and the quote in footnote (p) from the Histoire des voyages, Rousseau might have expected his European readers to have then sympathized with the savage who renounced European civilization and returned "to his equals," for any reservations the European reader might have felt about the savage when he initially looked at the frontispiece had been obviated.

III

IN ATTEMPTING to transform the European's image of the savage, Rousseau radically altered the relations of self and other implied in previous cross-cultural contacts. Careful examination of footnotes (f) and (p) suggests elements of what might have been Rousseau's strategy for transforming European image attitudes towards savagery. Apart from their obvious documentary function, they contain reports of European travelers to the homelands of non-European peoples and thus explicitly treat the contact of Europeans and savages.

In the passages cited above from footnotes (f) and (p) Rousseau relied upon observations made by one such traveler, Peter Kolben.\textsuperscript{20} Perhaps unlike most of his contemporary educated Europeans, Kolben was able to suspend his cultural prejudices regarding savages; this is evident in the sympathetic tone of his report, used by Rousseau in (p), of a savage who rejected European civilization. The ability of Kolben to have done this might be attributable to the kinds of experiences he had which Rousseau recounted in (f). Kolben saw the savage and the European in the savage milieu; there, as the story of the stolen tobacco suggests, the European rather than the savage was ridiculous.

In the text of the Second Discourse, Rousseau may well have used Kolben's experience as a model for transforming the European image of the savage. The savage was presented, not as a foreigner in Europe, but as a resident in his own, "natural" environment. For the European to confront the savage through reading the Discourse was, in effect, equivalent to repli-
cating Kolben's experience and an occasion for the European to compare himself to the savage in a context most favorable to the latter. By the time the European reader would have reached footnote (p) he could have been expected to have shared Kolben's (Rousseau's) sympathy for the savage, precisely because he would have had an equivalent of Kolben's other experience with savages as reported in footnote (f).

Another aspect of the strategy by which Rousseau transformed the image of the savage is indicated by the style of documentation in these footnotes. The story in footnote (p), for example, was called "well-authenticated." The passage quoted came from an edited general history of European explorations, Histoire des voyages, volume V, edited by Antoine François Prévost. The first seven volumes were a French translation of John Green's A New Collection of Voyages and Travels; in turn Green's work contained a paraphrase of Peter Kolben's Description du Cap de Bonne-Esperance. Rousseau in footnote (p), citing only Histoire des voyages, was, therefore, at least two levels removed from the original source of the report; his "well-authenticated" example could be more accurately described as an example of heresy. Along the same lines, Rousseau here, as well as in footnote (f), uncritically relied on eyewitness accounts. In prefacing Kolben's report in (f), Rousseau noted that "...as eyes alone are needed to observe these things, nothing prevents our giving credence to what eye witnesses certify about them." However, in footnote (j) he did not so uncritically rely on retellings of eyewitness accounts taken from Histoire des voyages; thus, in his discussion of species of anthropomorphic animals, Rousseau noted that:

The small number of lines these descriptions contain can enable us to judge how badly these animals were observed, and with what prejudices they were seen.

Rousseau failed to exercise the same degree of caution with the Histoire des voyages in footnotes (f) and (p), causing one to suspect a deliberate straining of credibility, as though he had tried to give as much air of authority as possible to the new image of the savage. Another example of this same documentary style may be seen in Rousseau's statement that the examples in footnote (f) were drawn at random "from the first books that come to hand." The claim to have found the cited passage by chance implies that there was no need to have laboriously searched for supporting source material and thus that there was much available; in fact, the sources for the quotes in both footnotes were exactly the same, a fact which Rousseau hid from his reader by mentioning Kolben by name in (f) but not in (p).

Our analysis of these footnotes suggests the possibility that Rousseau, in changing the European image of the savage, was creating what he knew to be a new stereotype; his surprisingly casual documentary style certainly creates the suspicion that he was self-consciously giving a case for the savage which was less supported by empirical evidence than he made it appear.

IV

SUCH a suspicion makes one sympathize with those who have been reluctant to take completely seriously Rousseau's ennoblement of the savage. Arthur O. Lovejoy, for example, has written of Rousseau's "supposed primitivism" and Dante Germino has described the Second Discourse as supposedly an idyllic account of the state of nature and a rejection of societal ex-
istence on principle. It purportedly idolizes primitive man, or the "noble savage."\textsuperscript{27}

The chief reason for this reluctance has been Rousseau's reservation that a return of civilized men to a preferable condition of savagery was impossible. Sheldon Wolin has emphasized this reservation in his argument that

What gave pathos to human alienation was that man could never regain his natural self, a point that Rousseau's critics have tended to ignore when charging him with favoring a return to the primeval slime. The anguish of the human condition was that man could never go back to the warm, dark womb of nature. "Savage man and politicized man are so fundamentally different in heart and by inclination that what gives happiness to the one reduces the other to despair."\textsuperscript{28}

Still, Rousseau's caveat that a return is impossible need not have negated the force of his praise of savagery if the praise had revolutionary intent through creating attitudinal dissonances that might be finally resolved by revolution. He, in effect, encouraged dissatisfaction with the ancien régime by the argument that the savage condition was humanly better than his contemporary Europe. In this respect, Rousseau may have been more interested in the psychological effect his picture of savagery would have than in its scientific validity. Further, any conservative or romantic implications of his praise of the savage condition were forestalled by the suggestion that while a simple return was impossible, a forward and progressive movement was possible. Rousseau in fact spoke of the "necessity of progress" and of new "revolutions" which would dissolve the existing government and bring it closer to its "legitimate institution."\textsuperscript{29} That the idea of revolution was introduced in the Discourse only after European civilization had been shown to be a radical decline from a nobler past of savagery suggests that part of Rousseau's intent in using the theme of the noble savage may have been to sensitize his audience to the desirability of innovations.

It may be helpful to view Rousseau's transvaluation of savagery in terms of a dialectical interaction of the categories of "self" and "other." The phenomenon of savagery tended to be viewed simply negatively by Rousseau's European contemporaries; "savage" was juxtaposed to "civilized" in much the same way that "barbarian" had been to "Greek" and "infidel" to "Christian."\textsuperscript{30} Such dichotomies were implicitly conservative insofar as the "other" —the barbarian, the infidel and the savage —was assumed to be inferior, providing no standard whatever for criticism of "self," much less a guide for change or improvement. Rousseau, however, tried to put the "other" in a new light, elevating the savage to a rank superior to the civilized. The transformed dichotomy was then potentially highly dynamic; a comparison between civilization and savagery could then suggest that "We who are civilized" are not good enough now.

Rousseau, then, made the savage as "other" a perhaps stereotypical standpoint for criticism of European civilization; since a simple return to savagery was impossible, however, savagery by itself could not be a sufficient guide for change. Perhaps the ennoblement of the savage in the Second Discourse was intended to establish an audience open to ideas of radical innovations, radically dissatisfied with European civilization of the time. It thus seems plausible that the Second Discourse should have come before Rousseau's Social Contract, which was a much more positive guide for change and improvement; without the Discourse, the Social Contract would have had no initially dissatisfied
address its creation of a revolutionary consciousness, perhaps the longing for

a lost past was a condition for a plan for the future.  

The image of a vigorous savage may have had sexual implications for the European and therefore may have abetted these kinds of overtones in the development of modern racial stereotypes.


"The pictured savage was not drawn in such a way as to remind the European of actual savages he might have seen; the pictured savage is fair-skinned with caucasian facial features. Actually he could have been portrayed in a manner likely to have been less appealing to the white European, for the observer of the engraving, without reading footnote (p), would not know that the savage depicted is a Hottentot.


would weaken the case for their moral superiority. There is at least one practice that would seem to be absolutely antithetical to virtually any moral position premised on a universalistic conception of man, i.e., cannibalism. Rousseau never ruled this out as a practice among savages. In fact, he may have intimated such a practice in his discussion of demographic and economic developments experienced by "nascent man":

... such was the life of an animal limited at first to pure sensations and scarcely profiting from the gifts nature offered him. Far from dreaming of wresting anything from it. But difficulties soon arose; it was necessary to learn to conquer them... (p. 142)

Greater physical agility and rudimentary weapons had to be acquired in order to surmount nature's obstacles, combat other animals when necessary, fight for... subsistence even with men...

In proportion as the human race spread, difficulties multiplied along with men. Differences of soil, climate, and season could force them to admit differences in their ways of life. Barren years, long and hard winters and scorching summers which consume everything required of the new industry. Along the sea and rivers they invented the fishing line and hook, and became fishermen and eaters of fish. In forests they made bows and arrows, and became hunters and warriors. (p. 143)

The next to last sentence quoted sets up a sequence of: tool of acquisition, mode of acquisition, and consumption. One would expect the last sentence to parallel its predecessor, yet one expected part of the sentence is not present, for tools and mode of acquisition are not followed by consumption. In place of the expected phrase "eaters of animals," one finds the word "warriors." If Rousseau had in mind only the acquisition of non-human animal flesh, then "warriors" would seem to be redundant of "hunters." If warriors is not redundant, it would seem necessary to refer to struggles with other humans. Possibly the struggles Rousseau had in mind were the indirect result of the acquisition and continued possession of scarce non-human flesh; however, there is still the problem of the lack of expected parallelism and, more importantly, the lack of struggle over fish under conditions of scarcity. We think that serious consideration should be given to the possibility that cannibalism was, under certain conditions, practiced in Rousseau's state of nature. It is certainly surprising that Rousseau never directly attacked the cannibalism component of the old stereotype of the savage as fostered by such "authorities" as Pliny.


Second Discourse, p. 172.

On the ambiguities in these dichotomies see Baudet, op. cit. passim.

The image of the noble savage, of course. may be viewed as having done much more than creating a revolutionary consciousness as a condition for the Social Contract, a positive guide for change and improvement. The noble savage also seems to have served as a model for the citizen or the moral personality of the Social Contract; the latter may be viewed as Rousseau's attempt to recover on the level of civilization the freedom and equality of the savage milieu.