

# ENLIGHTENMENT AGAINST EMPIRE

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# One

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## Introduction: Enlightenment Political Thought and the Age of Empire

IN THE late eighteenth century, a number of prominent European political thinkers attacked imperialism, not only defending non-European peoples against the injustices of European imperial rule, as some earlier modern thinkers had done, but also challenging the idea that Europeans had any right to subjugate, colonize, and ‘civilize’ the rest of the world. This book is a study of this historically anomalous and understudied episode of political thinking. It is an era unique in the history of modern political thought: strikingly, virtually every prominent and influential European thinker in the three hundred years before the eighteenth century and nearly the full century after it were either agnostic toward or enthusiastically in favour of imperialism. In the context of the many philosophical and political questions raised by the emerging relationships between the European and non-European worlds, Enlightenment anti-imperialist thinkers crafted nuanced and intriguingly counter-intuitive arguments about human nature, cultural diversity, cross-cultural moral judgements, and political obligations. This study aims both to pluralize our understanding of the philosophical era known as ‘the Enlightenment’ and to explore a set of arguments and intellectual dispositions that reorient contemporary assumptions about the relationship between human unity and human diversity.

Throughout this book, I use the term ‘Enlightenment’ as a temporal adjective; in this sense of the term, Enlightenment political theory simply refers to the political thought of the long eighteenth century (that is, the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries). As I argue in the concluding chapter, more substantive and conventional understandings of ‘the Enlightenment’ usually occlude more than they illuminate the writings about non-European peoples and empire by eighteenth-century political thinkers. This study, then, is neither a defence of ‘the’ Enlightenment nor an attack upon it, for an investigation of the anti-imperialist strand of eighteenth-century writings is meant to broaden our understanding of Enlightenment-era perspectives, rather than to redescribe ‘the’ Enlightenment or an overriding ‘Enlightenment project’ that ostensibly typified this age of philosophical thought. As with other historiographic terms of convenience, ‘the Enlightenment’ groups together an

extraordinarily diverse set of authors, texts, arguments, opinions, dispositions, assumptions, institutions, and practices. Thus, I begin this book with the presumption that we should diversify our understanding of Enlightenment thought.<sup>1</sup> On this understanding, rather than categorizing ‘the’ Enlightenment *as such* or constructing ideas of a single ‘Enlightenment project’ that one must defend or reject, I take Enlightenment anti-imperialist arguments, which are themselves multifaceted, to represent only some of many, often conflicting, discourses in eighteenth-century moral and political thought.

In the following chapters, I interpret the relationship among theories about the constitutive features of humanity, explanations of human diversity and historical change, and political arguments about European imperialism.<sup>2</sup> In exploring the rise of anti-imperialist arguments in Enlightenment political thought, I concentrate upon the philosophically robust and distinctive strand of such arguments made by Denis Diderot (1713–84), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). These thinkers are not usually grouped together; indeed, they could be viewed as fundamentally antithetical, as representing some of the contrasting ideal-types of eighteenth-century political thought: atheistic materialism, enlightened rationalism, and romantic nationalism. To begin with, such labels grossly distort their actual philosophies. Moreover, as I will argue, viewing these thinkers through the lens of debates about international relations that concerned them deeply, in particular those about the relationship between the European and non-European worlds, brings out the remarkable extent to which their political theories, though obviously unique to be sure, are nonetheless cut from the same cloth.<sup>3</sup> Diderot’s immense philosophical influence in this period with regard to questions of imperialism explains in part the shared intellectual disposition about the immorality of empire and the related philosophical ideas upon which this disposition often rested: theories of human nature; conceptualizations of human diversity; and the relationship between universal moral and political norms, on the one hand, and a commitment to moral incommensurability, on the other. As we will see, Diderot’s anti-imperialist contributions to Abbé Raynal’s *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* [*Philosophical and political history of European settlements and commerce in the two Indies*], one of the most widely read, ‘underground’ nonfiction works of the eighteenth century, appear to have left their mark on both Kant and Herder. Behind them all, I will argue, lie Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s writings, in particular the two *Discourses*, which exerted both a negative and a positive influence upon the development of this aspect of Enlightenment thought, for Diderot’s, Kant’s, and Herder’s anti-imperialism rested crucially upon both an appropriation as well as a rejection of

particular elements of Rousseau's philosophical anthropology and political thought.

In this chapter, I elaborate the historical and philosophical distinctiveness of Enlightenment anti-imperialist political thought. I also note briefly some of the philosophical sources and legacies of Enlightenment anti-imperialism, which I examine in more detail in the concluding chapter. As I will contend, a number of the conventional distinctions that are deployed by many contemporary political theorists—for instance, between universalism and relativism, or essential and constructed identities—fail to do justice to the arguments made by Enlightenment anti-imperialists, who often treat such supposed opposites as interrelated features of the human condition. A study of Enlightenment anti-imperialism offers a richer and more accurate portrait of eighteenth-century political thought and illuminates the underappreciated philosophical interconnections between human unity and human diversity, and between moral universalism and moral incommensurability.

### **Enlightenment Anti-imperialism as a Historical Anomaly**

Enlightenment anti-imperialist political theory has been the object of far less study than the anti-slavery writings of the same period.<sup>4</sup> Some of the best contemporary scholarship on slavery details the rising tide of philosophical opinion against it, and the emergence of a humanitarian ethic that provided the concepts and languages that newly formed anti-slavery societies and activists deployed in their controversial, lengthy, and ultimately successful campaigns. In their studies about slavery, David Brion Davis and Robin Blackburn attempt to discern why an institution that is universally decried today underwent no sustained opposition from a critical mass of thinkers and political actors until the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The same question can plausibly be asked with regard to imperialism, for it is only in the latter half of the eighteenth century that a group of significant European political thinkers began to attack the imperial and colonial enterprise as such. To be sure, in surveying the philosophical and political debates that followed the European discovery of the New World, one encounters discussions about the hypocrisy of European imperialists,<sup>6</sup> humanitarian attacks upon the practice of Amerindian slavery and other cruelties perpetrated by the conquistadors in the New World,<sup>7</sup> and romanticized (though, as I argue in chapter 2, ultimately dehumanizing) accounts of noble savages in travel, literary, and philosophical texts. Before the late eighteenth century, however, those who sympathized with the plight of colonized peoples and those who launched explicit criticisms of Europeans' relations with the non-European world (including

the most morally impassioned accounts, such as Bartolomé de Las Casas' arguments against the Castilian crown in the mid-sixteenth century) generally decried the abuses of imperial power, but not the imperial mission itself. Imperial rule, however it may have been perceived and justified (inter alia, in light of religious conversion, the civilizing mission of imperialism, economic and other commercial benefits, or the more rational use of otherwise supposedly wasted natural resources), was widely endorsed even by the most zealous *critics* of the violence perpetrated by Europeans in the New World.

Truly anti-imperialist political philosophy emerges in the late eighteenth century among a broad array of thinkers from different intellectual and national contexts. A significant group of European political thinkers rejected imperialism outright as unworkable, dangerous, or immoral—for economic reasons of free trade, as a result of principles of self-determination or cultural integrity, due to concerns about the effects of imperial politics upon domestic political institutions and practices, or out of contempt over the ironic spectacle of ostensibly civilized nations engaging in despotism, corruption, and lawlessness abroad. In confronting the steadily expanding commercial and political power of European states and imperial trading companies over the non-European world, the diverse group of thinkers who assailed the injustices and countered the dominant justifications of European imperialism include Jeremy Bentham, Condorcet, Diderot, Herder, Kant, and Adam Smith.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, such denunciations of what Herder liked to call “the grand European sponging enterprise” were complemented by more specific attacks upon European imperial or quasi-imperial activities in particular regions. Along these lines, the most notable efforts are Edmund Burke's legislative attempts to curtail and to regulate the activities of the East India Company and his lengthy, zealous prosecution of the impeachment of Warren Hastings, a senior East India Company official and the Governor-General of Bengal.<sup>9</sup> Burke argued that the British had failed to respect the sovereignty of local Indian powers, and had accordingly enriched themselves through illegal and unjust means, contributing not one iota, in his view, to the well-being of Indians themselves. In making such arguments, Burke was not a lone voice in the wilderness; rather, he raised concerns that were shared by a number of his contemporaries, a fact that has been neglected even by incisive scholars who have studied the connections between modern political theory and empire.<sup>10</sup> Of course, such anti-imperialist political thinkers fought an uphill battle, for defences of European imperial rule were still prevalent; the Enlightenment era is unique not because of the absence of imperialist arguments, but rather due to the presence of spirited attacks upon the foundations of empire.

Enlightenment anti-imperialism is understudied most likely because of

its failure to take root both in the broader political cultures in which it was presented and in the intellectual writings of later thinkers, including those who in some sense saw themselves as heirs to the tradition of progressive thinking of the eighteenth century. Here the contrast with anti-slavery writings is especially stark. Anti-slavery writings of the eighteenth century, from Montesquieu onward, provided much of the political language and principles that were used by anti-slavery activists and by newly formed anti-slavery societies; accordingly, the immorality of slavery became a common (though, of course, by no means a universal) presumption of nineteenth-century European social and political thought. Eighteenth-century anti-imperialist arguments, on the other hand, almost always went unheeded, not only by political, religious, and commercial authorities (as one would expect), but also by later political thinkers, including some of the most progressive social and political reformers of the nineteenth century. Those who crusaded against the fraud and oppression of imperial rule and the activities of commercial trading companies were generally ridiculed and ultimately defeated in their efforts. Burke's efforts in the Hastings trial are particularly suggestive of the failed political results of anti-imperialist crusades; Hastings was found innocent, and Burke's refusal to compromise on the India issue damaged his standing not only with his parliamentary colleagues, but also with the press and the general populace.<sup>11</sup> And although the French Revolution gave an impetus to eradicating slavery, revolutionary and post-revolutionary France, as Benjamin Constant noted, was firmly committed to a form of imperialism, one of conquest within Europe, in order to spread the ideals and institutions of the revolution.<sup>12</sup> Strikingly, with regard to intellectual opinion, anti-imperialist sentiments largely fell by the wayside as the eighteenth century came to a close. The anti-imperialist writings of the latter half of the eighteenth century failed to rally later thinkers to the cause of exposing imperialist injustices, defending non-European peoples against imperial rule, and attacking the standard rationales for empire. None of the most significant anti-imperialist thinkers of the eighteenth century can be matched with any nineteenth-century anti-imperialist thinker of a comparable stature. By the mid-nineteenth century, anti-imperialist political thinking was virtually absent from Western European intellectual debates, surfacing only rarely by way of philosophically obscure and politically marginal figures.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the major European political theorists of the immediate post-Enlightenment period either were ambivalent about European imperialism or were quite often explicitly in favour of it.

Thus, while imperialist arguments surface frequently in eighteenth-century European political debates, this period is anomalous in the history of modern political philosophy in that it includes a significant anti-



imperialist strand, one moreover that includes not simply marginal figures, but some of the most prominent and innovative thinkers of the age. In this respect, the nineteenth-century European political and philosophical discourse on empire marked a return to the frequently held imperialist sentiments of pre-Enlightenment political thought. While the dominance of languages of race and nation in the nineteenth century was new, the virtual consensus about the necessity and justice of imperialism among European political thinkers recalls the pre-Enlightenment discourse on empire. It is perhaps by reading popular nineteenth-century political views of progress, nationality, and empire back into the eighteenth century that ‘the Enlightenment’ as a whole has been characterized as a project that ultimately attempted to efface or marginalize difference, a characterization that has hidden from view the anti-imperialist strand of Enlightenment-era political thought.

## Synopsis

The following chapters proceed chronologically, and they are also linked biographically. Rousseau and Diderot were, for a time, friends who influenced one another’s political writings, in particular the texts under study in this book. As Kant himself famously attested, his philosophical commitments and intellectual disposition were deeply shaped by Rousseau’s writings. In addition, I will argue that Diderot’s most radical political and historical writings appear to have informed Kant’s and Herder’s anti-imperialism. As is well known, Herder studied under Kant at Königsberg, and held him in great admiration even after Kant had written critical book reviews of the first two installments of Herder’s masterpiece, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* [*Ideas Toward a Philosophy of History of Humankind*]. Approaching some of the philosophically most incisive and innovative currents of eighteenth-century political thought on human diversity and European imperialism reveals the overlapping and intersecting character of such writings and debates. The rapidly proliferating literature about human unity and diversity in the Enlightenment era reflects a cross-fertilization of concepts, arguments, and perspectives from diverse intellectual contexts.<sup>14</sup> Whatever the conclusions and assessments that one draws from their diverse writings, it is clear that many social and political reformers of the eighteenth century saw their efforts as part of a broad, though also a diffuse and contentious, multinational effort. Such a ‘Republic of Letters’, to use a phrase that was employed often in the eighteenth century, aimed to identify and to check oppression not only within Europe, but often also in light of what a number of eighteenth-century thinkers viewed as Europe’s tyranny over

other continents. Hence, the specific grouping of thinkers in this book illuminates both a cohesive set of arguments about international justice and cultural pluralism as well as a set of influences, both negative and positive, across national and ideological lines.

The rise of anti-imperialist political theory in the late eighteenth century depended upon far more than a universal ethic that ascribed value or dignity to every human being. In addition to the fact that the indigenous inhabitants of the New World had been considered by many Europeans, from the fifteenth century onward, to be subhuman, it is crucial to note that even when their humanity was accepted, they failed to win recognition as free and self-governing peoples. Within the modern natural right and social contractarian traditions, Amerindians in particular were almost always deployed as empirical examples of pure humans, that is, as beings who inhabit a state of nature and who thus exhibit purely natural qualities, such as natural sentiments or an unmediated knowledge of natural laws and rights. Ironically, however, for reasons that are philosophically revealing and that I will later discuss, the profoundly influential natural right theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Grotius and Vattel, as well as the social critics who celebrated Amerindians as noble savages, categorized Amerindians as the most purely human of humans, while also according them the weakest possible (and sometimes even a nonexistent) moral status in the face of European imperial power. The idea of what it meant fundamentally to be human went through a transformation before an anti-imperialist political theory could emerge. Human nature had sometimes been viewed as a stable category, one that is unchanging and that serves as a foundational essence upon which more ephemeral, particular features of human life (mores, institutions, social practices) are layered. This account came to be replaced—at times, no doubt, unwittingly, but largely in conscious opposition to naturalistic and unitary understandings of human nature—by the view that humanity is marked fundamentally by cultural difference. This is what I will call the view of *humanity as cultural agency*, which in varying ways animates the thinking of Diderot, Kant, and Herder.

By using the term ‘cultural agency’, I am not suggesting that Enlightenment anti-imperialists believed that there are different cultures, that non-Europeans are members of distinct cultures, and that such cultures are of worth equal to that of all other cultures. Enlightenment anti-imperialism is not ‘multiculturalist’ in this conventional (and contemporary) sense because eighteenth-century thinkers did not write of culture in the plural. This was a development that would occur in European writings of the nineteenth century, when ‘cultures’ would begin to signify (sometimes only certain) peoples. The Enlightenment anti-imperialists under study in this book, by contrast, believed that human beings are funda-

mentally cultural creatures, that is, they possess and exercise, simply by virtue of being human, a range of rational, emotive, aesthetic, and imaginative capacities that create, sustain, and transform diverse practices and institutions over time. The fact that humans are cultural agents, according to these writers, underlies the diverse mores, practices, beliefs, and institutions of different peoples. My use of the term ‘cultural’ is only somewhat anachronistic, since the philosophical use of the term ‘culture’ itself, in particular to denote some aspect of the differences among humans, emerges in a number of late eighteenth-century German writings. *Kultur*, like the English ‘culture’, derives from the Latin *cultura*, which referred to cultivation generally and often to agricultural practices, a fact that (as we will see) is by no means unimportant for appreciating some imperial understandings of cultural development. Even in its earliest uses, ‘culture’ was a highly ambiguous term, for it could refer to a particular social or collective lifestyle (usually sedentary and agricultural) or to an aesthetic sensibility that was posited either as an ideal or as a reality that had been achieved by only some peoples or individuals.<sup>15</sup> It could also, however, connote the constitutive features of humankind; in this book, I use the term ‘cultural agency’ in this most expansive sense, in order to indicate those qualities that humans have in common and that also account for many of their differences. The concept of ‘cultural agency’, then, signifies how Enlightenment anti-imperialists anthropologically employed the term ‘culture’ or its near equivalents and analogues. These include the French *mœurs*, which both Rousseau and Diderot employ in the context of theorizing human diversity, and the language of ‘sociability’, under which many eighteenth-century thinkers discussed the varied capacities, activities, and values that today would often be categorized by the word ‘culture’ and its variants.

Diderot, Kant, and Herder were all profoundly influenced by Rousseau’s account of human history and social life, of his conception of humans as free, self-making creatures, whose very freedom creates and perpetuates diverse psychological needs, social inequalities, and political constraints, while also serving potentially as a source for a less unjust society. But they argued, contra Rousseau, that humans are constitutively social and diverse creatures, that they are cultural agents. Thus, they appropriated Rousseau’s social criticism and much of his accompanying account of freedom, but jettisoned his attack on the idea of natural sociability. Diderot, Kant, and Herder all elaborated the view that, to use Edmund Burke’s concise formulation, “art is Man’s nature”.<sup>16</sup> Having appreciated Rousseau’s searing indictment of European mores, social institutions, political power, and economic inequality, they were loathe to recommend European societies as models for other peoples. But they were also unwilling to classify any people or set of peoples as virtually

natural, as free from artifice. For them, the art (or culture) that constitutes human practices, beliefs, and institutions is necessarily diverse and also, importantly, in many respects, incommensurable. Consequently, non-Europeans, including nomadic peoples who were often viewed as exotically uncultivated and purely natural, were members of societies that were artful, or cultural; they were simply artful in a different manner, one that could not be judged as intrinsically superior or inferior. At certain moments of Enlightenment thought, as cultural differences came to be viewed as the results produced by interactions of human freedom and reason with diverse environments—rather than as pathological aberrations from a single true way of life as represented by some set of European mores, practices, and institutions—Europeans' brutal treatment of foreign peoples evoked an outpouring of moral indignation and protest. Intriguingly, as the particularity and partial incommensurability of human lives came to the fore in a number of late eighteenth-century political writings, the moral universalism that occupied a formal, but ultimately hollow, position in earlier political theories became more genuinely inclusive.

In the following chapters, I examine the core philosophical assumptions and arguments that underlie the anti-imperialist political theories of Diderot, Kant, and Herder. In chapter 2, I examine a series of French writings that constitute what in retrospect can be identified as a tradition of noble savage thinking, which exerted an enormous influence upon many eighteenth-century thinkers, including Diderot. Focusing principally upon understandings of 'natural men' in Montaigne, Lahontan, and Rousseau, I then turn toward Diderot's appropriation and subversion of noble savagery in his account of Tahitian society in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*. Diderot's philosophic dialogue upsets the standard assumptions of noble savagery—most notably, the presumption of the existence and philosophical usefulness of 'natural' humans, who were thought to be free, or nearly free, of artifice or culture. Diderot's subversion of noble savagery and his attendant account of humanity as fundamentally cultural would help to ground many aspects of his anti-imperialist political thought. In chapter 3, I analyze Diderot's myriad arguments against empire and conquest in his influential contributions to Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes*, many of which reemerge in later Enlightenment attacks upon empire. In chapter 4, I examine Kant's understanding of 'humanity' in order to elucidate a key and often misunderstood concept of his political philosophy that has profound consequences for his writings on international and cosmopolitan justice. In Kant's view, humans were not at bottom metaphysical essences from whom one could abstract all social and cultural attachments, but rather they were fundamentally cultural agents. I offer an account of the understandings of reason and

freedom that he associated with ‘humanity’ and I show how this influenced his views of history and society. In chapter 5, I interpret Kant’s account of plural values in order to examine how he defends an anti-paternalistic conception of human development. I then turn to his understanding of human diversity and his attacks upon European imperialism in light of his account of humanity and ideal of cosmopolitan justice. In chapter 6, I provide an interpretation of Herder’s political thought that emphasizes both its distinctiveness and its deep similarities to Diderot’s and Kant’s anti-imperialist political philosophies. Underlying Herder’s account of pluralism and independent nationalities, I contend, is a nuanced and complex understanding of ‘humanity’ (*Humanität*) that is at once anthropological, moral, and political. Finally, in the concluding chapter, I present the key philosophical sources and legacies of the strand of Enlightenment anti-imperialism under study in this book. I argue that Diderot’s, Kant’s, and Herder’s incisive and hitherto underappreciated arguments against empire provide us with an opportunity to rethink prevalent assumptions about our understandings of ‘the’ Enlightenment and about the relationship between human unity and diversity, and between universal moral concepts and pluralistic ethical commitments. Common understandings of ‘Enlightenment universalism’ fail to come to terms with the complicated and intriguing manner in which Diderot, Kant, and Herder interweave commitments to moral universalism and moral incommensurability, to humanity and cultural difference. Such universal and particular categories in their political philosophies not only coexist, but deeply inform one another. Thus, as I will show, their arguments against empire treat the affirmation of a wide plurality of individual and collective ways of life and the dignity of a universal, shared humanity as fundamentally intertwined ethical and political commitments.

## Two

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### Toward a Subversion of Noble Savagery: From Natural Humans to Cultural Humans

THE DEVELOPMENT of anti-imperialist political thought in the late eighteenth century is attributable only partly to the development of the natural rights doctrine or, indeed, to any other version of the idea that humans as such deserve moral respect. It is a much noted feature of modern political theory that proponents of egalitarian doctrines of equal rights and liberty regularly flouted such norms when reflecting upon the social and political status of women, nonpropertied males, and those who were deemed foreign or exotic, among others. At times, this reflected a gross inconsistency between *prima facie* humanistic norms and self-serving or prejudicial arguments that sought to exclude certain categories of humans from having full social, legal, and political standing. This seeming paradox, however, could also follow from the specific characterization of universal principles themselves; as I will argue in this chapter, even on the assumption that non-Europeans or New World peoples were human, particular understandings of humanity were less likely (and, conversely, other understandings were more likely) to undergird political arguments in favour of the rights and liberties of non-European peoples. This tension between moral universalism and the politics of exclusion was overcome to a certain extent by anti-imperialist thinkers who framed the relationship between human nature and cultural pluralism differently from previous thinkers (and from some of their contemporaries); their view that imperial rule was manifestly unjust, and their inclination to defend a variety of non-European peoples against imperial policies and institutions, in part developed out of an understanding of humanity as cultural agency, a view that was distinct from that of a number of their most obvious forebears.

In this chapter, I investigate the philosophical and political assumptions and arguments that made this outlook possible in part by contrasting this view, as we find it in Diderot's understanding of Tahitian society, from the influential image of New World peoples as 'noble savages'.<sup>1</sup> This idealized conception of what were usually taken to be nomadic peoples sought to counter the most pejorative characterizations of foreign peoples as barbaric and fundamentally inferior. As David Brion Davis has plausibly speculated, the celebration of so-called primitives may well have "partially weaken[ed] Europe's arrogant ethnocentrism and create[d] at

least a momentary ambivalence about the human costs of modern civilization".<sup>2</sup> Yet, ultimately, as much as this may have helped to elicit the intellectual groundwork for the humanitarianism of anti-slavery thinking, a *rejection* of noble savagery was necessary before a more meaningful and substantive moral commiseration with non-Europeans could develop, in particular one that could help to engender an anti-imperialist political philosophy. As I will argue, the peculiar understanding of the relationship between human nature and culture in noble savage writings yielded a virtually dehumanizing exoticism, despite the best intentions of the thinkers who chose to celebrate what they saw as the 'purely natural' specimens of humanity in the New World. In order to understand how Diderot drew upon the mode of social criticism distinctive to the tradition of noble savagery, while also ultimately subverting its core presumptions about the character of New World peoples and indeed of humanity itself, we must first examine the exponents of this tradition who most shaped the relevant aspects of his intellectual milieu.

The interpretations of New World peoples inherited by eighteenth-century thinkers vary widely and are not reducible to any one doctrine, although theories that were based upon the purported genetic, behavioural, or cultural inferiority of Amerindians were by far the most influential and dominant at the outset of the century, by which time European colonial and imperial activities were well entrenched and steadily expanding. Given its complicated influence upon the group of anti-imperialist thinkers discussed in later chapters, I focus here largely upon the heterodox noble savage literature that, in contrast, celebrated New World peoples as intrinsically pacific and benevolent natural beings, free from the corruption not only of modern life but indeed of culture itself. The sixteenth-century essayist Michel de Montaigne plays a central role in the philosophical history of theorizing Amerindians, although he both deploys the idea of a noble savage and at times undermines it. While in this respect his writings foreshadow Diderot's views, they also reveal the deep philosophical tensions of noble savage theory, which Montaigne never comprehensively or directly explored. These tensions are even more glaring, and consequently the exoticism inherent in noble savagery is thrown into even sharper relief, in the writings of Baron Lahontan. At the turn of the eighteenth century, Lahontan, a French imperial officer who lived in Quebec and studied the Huron, Algonquin, and Iroquois peoples, was among the most influential noble savage theorists in the French tradition. Like other noble savage accounts, Lahontan's writings offer an amalgam of anthropological interpretations and radical social and political criticism. Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* is heavily indebted to Lahontan and Montaigne and to this tradition of social criticism in general, which highlighted and elaborated idealized representations of Amerindians from

New World ethnography. As with previous attacks on European social practices and political institutions that used the Amerindian as a pure and natural foil, European imperialism itself was never the sustained object of Rousseau's trenchant criticism. Paradoxically, as I argue later, identifying indigenous Americans as purely human resulted ultimately in their dehumanization, making the possibility of any meaningful commiseration with their oppression remote. Nonetheless, the subtlety and power of Rousseau's account of humans as self-making (and self-enslaving) agents shaped the political thought of Diderot, in addition to the writings of Kant and Herder. When the critical features of Rousseau's account of freedom and history were conjoined to a philosophical anthropology that, contra Rousseau, viewed social and cultural differentiation as central to the human condition, it became more likely that at least some thinkers would engage in sustained intellectual assaults upon European state power not only in a domestic or intra-European setting, but also as it was exercised in imperialist ventures abroad. Thus, Rousseau looms over the latter half of the eighteenth century as an ambiguous figure who both impedes and enables the development of anti-imperialist political thought. To understand this better, however, and to appreciate the innovation of thinkers such as Diderot, Kant, and Herder, it is crucial to begin with the accounts of noble savagery that most informed Rousseau's (and through Rousseau, Diderot's) understanding of New World peoples.

The accounts of many of the earliest encounters between Europeans and Amerindians contain reactions toward New World peoples that implied, or more directly offered, praise for what was perceived to be their 'natural' manner of living. Idealized portrayals of Amerindians in these writings reflect the varied, and at times conflicting, fables about faraway lands and peoples across the seas that shaped the expectations of the late-fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century explorers, missionaries, and soldiers who travelled to the Americas. Imagined visions of distant lands occupied by magical creatures, instantiations of mythological 'wild men', or members of a golden age who were celebrated in song and in lyrical poetry no doubt helped to occasion moments of what can be described in hindsight as noble savagery.<sup>3</sup> To the extent that early accounts contained any positive assessments of Amerindians, they typically offered only fleeting moments of adulation of Amerindians' rusticity, which could then turn rapidly to outright disgust at what appeared to explorers and settlers as manifestly backward and barbaric appearances and behaviour. Still, these occasional nonpejorative expressions of wonder often became widely circulated and redescribed, eventually forming a vivid image of the Amerindian that served many rhetorical purposes for imperial administrators, church officials, theologians, social critics, and the humanist literati. One of the origins of noble savage sentiments, for instance, can be found in



missionaries' writings that lauded Amerindians' simple nobility and reasonableness both in an effort to persuade European political authorities that they could be converted and to censure sinful behaviour within modern European societies.<sup>4</sup> More sustained noble savage accounts, however, broadly attacked Europe's moral standing—and that of all civilizations—rather than supporting the more conventional social and political aims that inspired many of the isolated fragments of wonder and praise in the earliest travel literature and theological commentaries. The distinction between nature and artifice, which plays such a central role in Montaigne's influential essay, "Des Cannibales" ["Of Cannibals"] (1578–80), was crucial to such modes of radical social criticism.

### Noble Savagery in Montaigne's "Of Cannibals"

One especially significant instance of the proliferation of noble savagery can be traced to Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus* (1503), a letter that became one of the most popular essays on the New World in the sixteenth century.

They have no cloth of wool, linen, or cotton, since they need none. Nor have they private property, but own everything in common: they live together without a king and without authorities, each man his own master. They take as many wives as they wish, and son may couple with mother, brother with sister, cousin with cousin, and in general men with women as they chance to meet. They dissolve marriage as often as they please, observing no order in any of these matters. Moreover, they have no temple and no religion, nor do they worship idols. What more can I say? They live according to nature, and might be called Epicureans rather than Stoics. There are no merchants among them, nor is there any commerce. The peoples make war among themselves without art or order.<sup>5</sup>

The lack of "art or order" among beings who live simply according to nature is a trope that emerges in nearly every idealized conception of Amerindian life, although the specific manner in which such "natural" lifestyles are presented and explained differ from thinker to thinker. A key philosophical assumption of such portrayals is that a human life *could* be simply natural (or very nearly so), free from the 'artificial', regular social practices and constructed institutions that shape human expectations and form the horizon of possibilities—free, that is, from what would now most often be described as 'culture'. Montaigne paraphrased Amerigo's celebrated description, but set it in the context of a more extensive discourse about the corruption of European societies and the superior excellence of nature's treasures, which included for him most of the indige-

nous inhabitants of the New World who had hardly strayed from their “original naturalness” (153).<sup>6</sup>

Montaigne’s essay is often interpreted as an ingenious attempt at complicating the very idea of savagery, for he directly challenges the view that Amerindians are savage in any pejorative sense.<sup>7</sup> A proper understanding of the term *sauvage*, in his view, shows that Europeans who have altered themselves and their environments are in fact savagely artificial, rather than naturally pure. As Montaigne argues,

Those people [Amerindians] are wild [*sauvage*], just as we call wild [*sauvage*] the fruits that Nature has produced by herself and in her normal course; whereas really it is those that we have changed artificially and led astray from the common order, that we should rather call wild [*sauvage*]. The former retain alive and vigorous their genuine, their most useful and natural, virtues and properties, which we have debased in the latter in adapting them to gratify our corrupted taste. (152)

Yet, while this challenges the moral superiority associated with cultivation or civilization (though he himself does not use the latter term in this context), his analysis of the term “savage” serves only to replicate antecedent understandings of Amerindians as noble savages. Amerindians are savage, Montaigne argues, not in the sense that they are inferior, but only in the sense that they are natural, closer to what human beings are like in a pure, undeveloped state, and thus without the largely corrupting layers of artificiality that constitute modern humans. This is, of course, what a number of previous and seemingly nonpejorative descriptions of Amerindians had asserted. Montaigne makes the simple naturalness of Amerindians explicit when he concludes that “[t]hese nations, then, seem to me barbarous only in this sense, that they have been fashioned very little by the human mind, and are still very close to their original naturalness.” (153) It is precisely to underscore this point that Montaigne paraphrases Amerigo’s celebrated description of Amerindian life. Montaigne declares,

This is a nation, I should say to Plato, in which there is no sort of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name for a magistrate or for political superiority, no custom of servitude, no riches or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no partitions, no occupations but leisure ones, no care for any but common kinship, no clothes, no agriculture, no metal or use of wine or wheat. (153)

By way of John Florio’s English translation of “Des Cannibales”, this passage would emerge yet again, and the attendant understanding of Amerindians as pure, undeveloped natural humans would be further popularized through yet another literary form in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.<sup>8</sup>

The initial amazement that New World peoples led seemingly pristine lives developed over time into a tradition that understood Amerindians according to recurring, naturalistic themes, albeit with minor (and sometimes instructive) variations. Montaigne's effort at unravelling the meanings and implications of a 'savage' existence, one that could in many respects be celebrated over and against European ways of life, rests principally upon an examination of what specifically constituted a 'natural' life. Montaigne does not systematically study this question, but his characteristically subtle and meandering thoughts on the topic outline the range of meanings of a 'natural' existence that many later thinkers would draw together into theories about human nature and the origins of human societies.

For Montaigne, a natural life consists of the most simple physical and psychological needs. "They [the Amerindians] are still in that happy state of desiring only as much as their natural needs demand; anything beyond this is superfluous to them." (156) On this view, Amerindians are not corrupted by an attachment to material goods (or, even worse, by a fondness for luxury), as Montaigne suggests in his discussion of wars among Amerindian nations. The wars that New World peoples fight among each other are motivated not by base material concerns but by an elevated sense of courage; while this might not excuse them for engaging in the horrors of war, it nevertheless offers a sharp contrast, he implies, to the self-interested motives that appear to lie behind the European conquest of the Americas.

Their warfare is wholly noble and generous, and as excusable and beautiful as this human disease can be; its only basis among them is their rivalry in valour. They are not fighting for the conquest of new lands, for they still enjoy that natural abundance that provides them without toil and trouble with all necessary things in such profusion that they have no wish to enlarge their boundaries. (156)

Montaigne contrasts what is savage or natural and what is artificial and conventional not only at an individual but concomitantly at a social level, for the lack of superfluous personal desires helps to maintain a relatively egalitarian society. He contends that Amerindians appear to live in entirely (or largely) communal societies that tend to shun private property and that distribute all (or nearly all) goods in common.

They generally call those of the same age, brothers; those who are younger, children; and the old men are fathers to all the others. These leave to their heirs in common the full possession of their property, without division or any other title at all than just the one that Nature gives to her creatures in bringing them into the world.<sup>9</sup> (156)

The near absence among New World peoples of what were taken to be artificial hierarchies and inequalities, in particular those of political authority, would be asserted by virtually all of the foremost social contract thinkers in the European tradition, from Grotius and Hobbes to Locke and Pufendorf (though not, as we shall see, by Kant), for this supposed anthropological fact about Amerindians buttressed the philosophical claim that all humans are naturally equal and that political power is thoroughly artificial and constructed. As with later thinkers who would deploy the image of noble savagery, Montaigne connects these two ideas of simple desires and egalitarianism with a third: the moral health of a non-hierarchical and simple life engenders physical health. Drawing his information, we are told, from a European friend who lived for a time in Brazil, Montaigne contends that “it is rare to see a sick man there” (153). Conversely, as we will see with Lahontan and later Rousseau, Europeans’ diseases are said to result most often from either their luxury or their poverty, both of which rest upon artificial desires and social, legal, and political inequalities that are minimal in the New World.

What animates the behaviour of savage peoples, given that they purportedly lack culture? The concepts that best address this aspect of noble savagery in Montaigne can be derived from the schema that he borrows from Plato to defend the idea that what is “natural” is often superior, more perfect (or less imperfect), and more praiseworthy than what is artificially created: “All things, says Plato, are produced by nature, by fortune, or by art; the greatest and most beautiful by one or the other of the first two, the least and most imperfect by the last.” (153) As we have seen, for Montaigne, New World peoples—with the exception of the Mexica and Inca nations that he discusses toward the end of a later essay, “Des Coches” [“Of Coaches”] (1585–88)—are altered by hardly any cultural artifice. This nearly acultural understanding of New World peoples leaves the work of the creation and maintenance of these societies largely to fortune and nature. The role of climate, a key category in the analysis of human diversity not only in Montaigne’s time but through the Enlightenment period, was central to his understanding of the role of fortune in helping to bring about and to maintain savage societies. New World peoples were blessed by a favourable climate and an abundance of natural resources that afforded sustenance without the need of complex social organizations and intensive industry, “without toil and trouble” (156). “[T]hey live in a country”, Montaigne explains, “with a very pleasant and temperate climate. . . . They have a great abundance of fish and flesh . . . and they eat them with no other artifice than cooking.” (153) But the primary ordering principle, or source, of such savage lives is nature itself. “The laws of nature still rule them, very little corrupted by ours” (153). For most, perhaps even all, noble savage accounts, savagery

is largely a function of naturalness, which is generally seen as the antithesis of artificiality and of culture, that is, of any of the modes of thinking, acting, imagining, and creating that are at all conventional, that vary over time and place, and are performed differently by various peoples and even by different individuals.

If New World peoples are ‘natural’ and ‘savage’, there remains the difficult question of how such peoples exercise their rationality and whether their rationality generates and revises practices and institutions through the use of reason, memory, imagination, and other creative faculties. No proponent of noble savagery as a method of understanding the peoples of the New World doubted their capacity to foster such cultural agency in the future—if they became cultivated, for instance, by Europeans who would introduce supposedly artificial ways of life to them. In their allegedly natural condition, however, before what proponents of noble savagery would consider largely corrupting foreign conventional practices and institutions were introduced to them, a savage or natural life is driven either by natural instincts that mechanically motivate individuals and even whole societies, or by the innate knowledge and virtually automatic observance of natural laws. Many noble savage accounts moved back and forth, however inconsistently, between the two, with Amerindians and at times other New World peoples leading ‘natural’ lives sometimes by instinct and other times by rationally following the dictates of natural law. While the latter option would appear to partake of some sense of active rationality, noble savage accounts rarely attribute to New World peoples the act of choice or agency to follow or not to follow such laws. Indeed, it seems at times that such accounts do not even describe them as consciously following such laws or principles, or if so then only because a life oriented toward pleasure corresponds to them. It is telling that Amerigo notes that Amerindians are natural in the manner of Epicureans, rather than Stoics, for this implies that their natural lifestyle derives from following their most basic desires in order to meet their unartificial needs and thus to engage in healthy pleasures, rather than leading such lives from a more sober, self-disciplined, reasoned, or Stoic assessment of the superiority of a rustic way of life.<sup>10</sup> Montaigne writes that natural laws rule Amerindians, hence producing a “happy state of man” that “surpasses . . . all the pictures in which poets have idealized the golden age”, rather than describing Amerindians themselves as cognizing, understanding, and applying natural laws to their specific conditions (153). This is the manner in which nearly all noble savage accounts tend to reduce peoples to sets of hard-wired creatures who follow their most basic (and presumably naturally good) physiological drives or who instinctively put into practice the laws of nature, for such behaviour most closely conforms to the key claim of noble savage narratives: that a non-

artificial, or acultural, life empirically exists. Montaigne himself notes that the greatest lawgivers, such as Lycurgus and Plato, would be incredulous that such societies in the New World could exist with virtually no consciously created and maintained order: “They could not imagine a naturalness so pure and simple as we see by experience; nor could they believe that our society [i.e., the one that we Europeans witness in the New World] could be maintained with so little artifice and human sorder.” (153)

This understanding of New World peoples at times creates tensions within noble savage accounts, for one of the central critical claims of these writings is that the prevalent idea that such peoples are inferior or barbaric is wrongheaded. Yet, in order to make this charge and hence to humanize these peoples, proponents of noble savage understandings would laud not only the naturalness but also on occasion the mental acuity and ingeniousness of such peoples. Thus Montaigne feels compelled to contest the view that

all this [Amerindian behaviour] is done through a simple and servile bondage to usage and through the pressure of the authority of their ancient customs, without reasoning or judgement, and because their minds are so stupid that they cannot take any other course. . . .<sup>11</sup> (158)

To prove that Amerindians are not simply creatures of custom (note that he does not, of course, aim to challenge the view that they are largely creatures of *nature*), Montaigne cites two examples of “their capacity”: a stirring song composed by an Amerindian prisoner of war in order to taunt his captors, and a love song, both of which demonstrate the lack of barbarity in Amerindians’ character. Yet these stray examples of aesthetic creativity do not amount to a defence of the idea that New World societies are maintained first and foremost by creative powers, for this would undercut the naturalness that is integral to the idea of a praiseworthy savage. To be sure, Montaigne makes several claims about various kinds of creativity and excellence in “Of Coaches”, but with regard to the Mexica and Inca—that is, with reference to sedentary, agriculturally based, city-dwelling peoples, those who more easily fit the prevalent understandings of what constituted ‘civilized’ society. From the late fifteenth century onward, in European ethnographic writings and other texts that drew upon them or from direct experience in the New World, the less complex societies of hunters, gatherers, fishermen, and pastoralists were almost always the referents for either the most depraved and barbaric or, in the hands of noble savage theorists, the most natural and praiseworthy peoples; these are the peoples Montaigne discusses in “Of Cannibals” and he presents them there almost without exception as unartificial, naturally driven humans. There is no doubt that on occasion Mon-

taigne acknowledged, in effect, that the simplest peoples could also manifest a kind of cultural agency, but, given the predominant assertion of the cannibals essay, that “these peoples are fashioned very little by the human mind” (153), this thicker view of Amerindian life emerges as a curious and somewhat inconsistent footnote to the more central theme of the “naturalness” of New World societies. The resulting paradox of an image of purely natural humans who lack all artifice, yet who also appear impressively at times to practise certain arts lies unresolved and undertheorized in “Of Cannibals”, as it is in later thinkers of the noble savage tradition. As we will see, this paradox takes shape in Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*, since he presents New World peoples there both to flesh out the image of a pure state of nature and to present empirical examples of the middle (post-natural, but precivilized) stage of human development. The manner in which Enlightenment thinkers responded, often tacitly, to this paradox shaped their theories of the relationship between human nature and culture, and led in some cases to the reconceptualization of noble savage arguments and assumptions; in the case of Diderot, it would even lead to what amounted to a rejection of the concept of noble savagery.

Paradoxes of this kind were usually not explicitly taken up by noble savage thinkers because the primary purpose of such accounts was not to produce an accurate ethnography (although, to be sure, the rhetorical power of these writings did much to shape Europeans’ attitudes about actual New World peoples), but to foster social criticism. First and foremost, the concept of the noble savage was a critical device that could serve the interests of thinkers who sought to challenge a variety of orthodox doctrines. Two central normative claims run through most noble savage writings: first, that one should be wary of judging others simply by one’s own, possibly parochial, standards and, second, that a sympathetic analysis of the ‘natural’ peoples of the New World could place into particularly sharp relief the deep injustices of ‘artificial’ European societies.

These critical impulses find their expression most clearly in Montaigne’s response to the view that Amerindians are barbaric.

[T]here is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, from what I have been told, except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in. (152)

The plurality of perspectives from which one can make moral judgements and the resultant appeals to tolerance and against narrow dogmatism are among the best known features of Montaigne’s thinking, but it is the controversy regarding the barbarity of cannibalism in the New World that afforded him with an especially propitious opportunity to develop the

most distinctive features of his moral thought. Despite the thoroughgoing scepticism of his most sustained attacks upon transcendent notions of truth and knowledge, in particular in the “The Apology for Raymond Seybond” (originally written 1575–76; revised 1578–80), Montaigne’s ultimate object of scorn in most of his essays is self-serving, intellectual dogmatism and the prejudices that flow from it, and not the very idea of cross-cultural standards of judgement. Indeed, as he notes above, it only “seems” as if we have no other standard of truth than our own customs, and at the outset of the cannibals essay he intones that “we should beware of clinging to vulgar opinions, and judge things by reason’s way, not by popular say.” (150) In confronting the reported existence of cannibalism in the Americas (interpreted by Montaigne as a corollary of warfare among New World peoples, who at times kill and then eat certain prisoners of war), Montaigne seeks to balance the demands of judging by reason and engaging in a tolerant scepticism by arguing that the practice of cannibalism is indeed barbaric, but that Europeans, precisely by attacking cannibalism abroad, fail to notice and to criticize the barbaric cannibalism of religious and political persecution at home.

I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own. I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; and in tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling, in roasting a man bit by bit, in having him bitten and mangled by dogs and swine (as we have not only read but seen within fresh memory, not among ancient enemies, but among neighbors and fellow citizens, and what is worse, on the pretext of piety and religion), than in roasting and eating him after he is dead. (155)

If we are to judge others by defensible standards, then such standards should be used with reference to our own practices and institutions. In doing so, Montaigne suggests that New World peoples may well be described as engaging in barbaric practices, but that the standards by which such barbarity should be judged derive not from our own supposed excellence or goodness, but rather “in respect to the rules of reason”. According to such standards, Montaigne asserts that Europeans surpass Amerindians “in every kind of barbarity”, a claim whose general formulation would recur in many noble savage accounts: it is we who are the real (or the more fully realized) barbarians (156).

Montaigne’s treatment of cannibalism, then, allows him both to attack what he sees as the predominant impulse to judge others simply according to one’s own practices and customs and to draw upon New World ethnography in order to attack injustices within Europe. The mode of social criticism of European institutions and practices that was most dis-



tinctive to the noble savage literature, however, and one that was especially potent, was to speculate or to report upon what New World indigenous individuals themselves thought of Europeans and of Europe more generally. Montaigne ends his essay with this classic device of criticism, when he reports of a visit that he had personally witnessed (in 1562, when he was a counselor to the Parlement of Bordeaux) of three Amerindians to the court of King Charles IX in Rouen. The puzzled reaction of these visitors, Montaigne reports, concerned the curious sight of grown men serving a child, and of the vast and persistent disparity of wealth in France. The ‘natural’ lives of relatively egalitarian and communal individuals in the New World here directly confront the artificiality of hereditary monarchical rule and the artificial inequalities of wealth of a supposedly advanced society.

Philosophically, New World ethnography offered thinkers such as Montaigne, and those who would be influenced by him, with a rich trove of empirical examples that could provide a reliable portrait of humans’ fundamental properties. In this view, ‘human nature’ can be discerned effortlessly in the New World since it was thought to be populated by ‘natural humans’. Thus, no longer would one have to rely solely upon arcadian myths of pastoral simplicity and happiness, or past golden ages as celebrated in poems, epics, songs, and pictorial representations, to reflect upon the innocent and simple nature of humanity. Such naturalness actually exists today, noble savage proponents could argue; moreover, their presence was said to be a living example of Europe’s (and humanity’s) own past. This temporal claim, that the New World was new not only to European explorers, but new to the development of social and political life itself, and that it represented the earliest stages of human history that civilized societies themselves once inhabited, became a key feature of many interpretive accounts of New World peoples. Those who viewed them as fundamentally inferior could use such an assumption to argue for their forced enslavement or civilization under imperial rule. In contrast, noble savage writings presented the earliest stages of humanity, as represented by Amerindians and others, as savage only in the sense, as Montaigne argues, that they are close to humanity’s “original naturalness”.

At the beginning of the discussion of the New World in “Of Coaches”, before focusing upon the Mexica and Inca nations, Montaigne describes New World societies as part of an “infant world”, apparently drawing again upon Amerigo’s vivid description in *Mundus Novus*.

Our world has just discovered another world . . . no less great, full, and well-limbed than itself, yet so new and so infantile that it is still being taught its A B C; not fifty years ago it knew neither letters, nor weights and measures, nor

clothes, nor wheat nor vines. It was still quite naked at the breast, and lived only on what its nursing mother provided. (693)

The infantilization of New World peoples by noble savage writers was meant primarily as an attack upon the decrepitude of European civilization, which they generally viewed as well past its prime, and not as an attempt to lower the status of ‘new’ peoples. Again, such understandings gave further currency to narratives that were already well established, from the Biblical narrative of Eden to countless meditations upon the golden ages of the most ancient and (in such accounts) the happiest peoples. The states of nature described by modern social contract theories not surprisingly elaborated these themes, although the manner in which New World ethnography was interpreted differed according to the natural condition that was being justified. Regardless of the substantive anthropological claims in such arguments, it became a commonplace of such contractarian arguments of governmental power and natural rights to assert, as John Locke could with confidence in the 1680s, that “in the beginning all the World was *America*.”<sup>12</sup>

The presentation of New World peoples that served as the anthropological basis of unorthodox, or even radical, moral and political claims ultimately came at the price of presenting them as largely hard-wired automatons, rather than as creative agents who were embedded within and who shaped and altered cultural systems of meaning and value; the latter belonged to the life of civilized artificiality, and not—most emphatically not in this view—of the natural, savage peoples of the New World. Still, it is important to note that the intent, and much of the power, of such accounts lay in their attempts to foster humanistic and tolerant moral judgements in addition to offering a sharper sense of the injustices of Europe’s own social, religious, and political order. Although not by intent then, but nevertheless in effect, the irony of treating New World peoples as the earliest, least artificial, and most natural humans—the very attempt, that is, to humanize them or to turn their presumed savagery into a badge of honour—ultimately cast them as lacking the cultural agency that would have made them recognizably human. The closer to nature they were said to be, the more exotically and inhumanly foreign they appeared. As Montaigne himself notes of his portrayal of Amerindians, “there is an amazing distance between their character and ours.” (158) Closing this distance, however, would involve not only reinterpreting the relevant ethnographic accounts, but also revising the accompanying philosophical arguments in noble savage writings—those that were either explicitly delineated or tacitly invoked—about human nature and its relationship to culture. Only then would some European thinkers more successfully humanize New World peoples.

## Lahontan's Dialogue with a Huron

Notwithstanding Montaigne's stature among the *philosophes*, the most influential noble savage writer in the French tradition was Louis-Armand de Lom d'Arce, baron de Lahontan, who in 1703 published in a two-volume set a collection of letters that he had written while in Canada (*Nouveaux Voyages* [*New Voyages*]); a discourse on the lands, peoples, and colonial politics of the New World (*Mémoires de l'Amérique Septentrionale* [*Memoirs of North America*]); and an enormously popular dialogue ostensibly between Lahontan and a Huron (*Dialogues Curieux entre l'Auteur et un Sauvage de bons sens qui a voyagé* [*Curious dialogues between the author and a savage of good sense who has travelled*]). An army officer who commanded local garrisons in New France, Lahontan travelled widely within North America, created maps (though sometimes fanciful and highly flawed) of territories hitherto unknown to Europeans, lived occasionally with indigenous peoples, and eventually learned to speak Algonquin and Huron. In 1693, after a political controversy stemming from charges of insubordination, he fled to Amsterdam and, for a time, became a vagabond. His personal history and itinerant lifestyle were so obscure that some disputed his existence when his writings were published. In spite of such eccentricities, Lahontan reached a wide audience and popularized, probably more than any other single thinker in the French tradition, the image of the noble savage: Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau, and Voltaire (as well as Swift) were among those influenced by his writings.

Using a style that was imitated at times by such thinkers, Lahontan places almost all of his critical commentary about European societies in the mouths of Amerindians. Perhaps hoping to stave off any controversy that might have affected him personally (oddly, perhaps, given his practically fugitive status at the time of publication), Lahontan carefully presents criticisms of European mores and practices as descriptions of Amerindians' attitudes. Thus, his writings are full of editorial comments impugning such criticisms and asserting, however weakly, the obvious superiority of civilization to savagery. It is not insignificant that, in the *Dialogues*, the eponymous character Lahontan attempts to convince Adario, a Huron, of the benefits of European civilization and Christianity. Yet, despite this (somewhat transparent) caution and the partly confused tone that results, the upshot of Lahontan's dialogue is clear: recalling an identical point made by Montaigne, Lahontan writes that "the name of savages that we bestow among them would fit ourselves better".<sup>13</sup> Lahontan describes Amerindians' lives as happier and more fulfilling than those of Europeans; hence, despite the character Lahontan's arguments to the

contrary, the *Dialogues* presents Adario's disgust with European society as entirely well founded.<sup>14</sup>

Lahontan's writings incorporate many of the staple elements of noble savage accounts. Hurons' simple lives are made possible, he writes, by their lack of attachment to material goods: the "Savages know neither thine nor mine, for what belongs to one is equally that of another." (95) Once again, as Montaigne had suggested, a vigorous and natural lifestyle ensures robust physical constitutions, free from most diseases and easily restored to health from common maladies (93–95; cf. 200–201). Behind the minimalism and good will of New World peoples lies a profound equality that Lahontan frequently contrasts with European societies. In a comment that encapsulates the purported egalitarianism of Huron life, Adario announces proudly that among his people "everyone is as rich and as noble as his neighbour; the women are entitled to the same liberty with the men, and the children enjoy the same privileges with their fathers." (228) Such sentiments fuel Lahontan's criticism of monarchies: in an absurd contrast to the freedom from rank and privilege in the New World, the French bend their knees to a single all-powerful ruler. Lahontan claims that Amerindians themselves "brand us for slaves" by noting that "we degrade ourselves in subjecting ourselves to one man who possesses the whole power, and is bound by no law but his own will" (96). In addition, Amerindians' supposed antipathy toward distinctions of rank and wealth forms the basis of a stringent assault on private interests and luxury that presage many of Rousseau's specific criticisms of civilized life. Separate, private interests that follow from the distinction between "mine and thine", Adario argues, are ultimately the roots of all evil; they are exacerbated by the existence of currency, the treacherous drive toward accumulating wealth, and the distinctions perpetuated by such means (199–201). Hurons are free because they are their own masters, enslaved neither by their appetites (in particular, the quest for social standing and wealth) nor by other people who claim superiority (the clergy, magistrates, nobles, and kings). As Rousseau would later argue at length, Lahontan's Adario asserts that this freedom from dependence is the source of true liberty, a quality unknown to modern Europeans, but at the heart of savage life (183–85).

The lesson that Lahontan could offer for Europe is potentially radical: dismantle civilization itself in order to live a humane and free existence. Indeed, Adario claims that Providence may lie behind Europeans' discovery of North America because they may now have an opportunity to correct their faults and follow the example of Amerindians. Moreover, Lahontan describes the values that Amerindians embody—innocence of life, tranquillity of mind, a communal existence free from selfish and parochial divisions—as *human* values and, thus, as universally applicable.

On this view, all humans should work toward them because they manifest the fundamental goodness of human nature itself (181–83). Yet, as with so many thinkers who used the image of the noble savage, Lahontan is not a proponent of primitivism; he never claims that Europeans should, as it were, return to the forests. His constructive advice is rather thin, and consists largely of a call for the gradual levelling of social strata in Europe in order to benefit the poor and to combat the petty, corrupting, and selfish private interests that are based on distinctions of wealth (197–98). The egalitarian impulse behind such ideas certainly has a utopian cast—indeed, the tone of Lahontan’s writings at times resonates with an almost revolutionary fervour. But, in the final analysis, the power of his rhetoric rests more in its social criticism than in its vague calls for reform.

Lahontan supplements Montaigne’s classic account of Amerindians by more comprehensively elaborating what had become the standard objections in the noble savage literature against European civilized society. Moreover, he examines two subjects that would play a prominent role in many later eighteenth-century noble savage writings: Christianity and the status of women. Lahontan portrays Amerindians as believers in a “natural” religion, a claim that Montaigne briefly touched upon in “Of Cannibals” and that anti-clerical thinkers such as Voltaire and Diderot would make as well. Lahontan presents a view of spirituality that rests solely upon the rational cognition of a basic postulate: that a powerful being created the Earth and instituted moral laws discernible through reason alone (105–12). The existence of a hierarchy of clergy and of formal religious institutions, he thus implies, are unnecessary and corrupting additions to the pure and simple faith that all humans should enjoy.<sup>15</sup> Under the weight of a host of superfluous and sometimes contradictory rules and obligations, Christians become hypocrites, especially in their role as missionaries—preaching such doctrines to Amerindians, while acting contrary to them (111–12).

The New World travel literature inspired a diverse range of arguments about the role of women in society, and more generally about the themes of love, marriage, and sexuality. A common theme in writings that appropriated New World ethnography in order to highlight the purported barbarism of New World peoples was that women in New World societies were especially maltreated and subject to conditions of near slavery and that Europe, in comparison, offered a civilized liberty to its women. While this sentiment at times curiously emerged in writings that largely celebrated the natural lifestyles of New World peoples and criticized European social and political attitudes, many noble savage writers challenged such conventional arguments by celebrating what they understood to be the relative equality of men and women in ‘natural’ societies. More broadly, love and intimacy were at times interpreted through the lenses of nature and artificiality in order to cast aspersions against Euro-

pean gender relations, though this could sometimes take the form of primarily criticizing European women for purportedly controlling men through their artificial and complex sexual charms. In a passage that recalls and may have inspired such a discussion about moral versus physical love in Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, Lahontan contrasts the jealous, blind fury of European love to the simple good will of Amerindians' passions (115–16). The sexual relations between men and women among indigenous Canadians strikes Lahontan as more honest and sincere than the excessively formalized and Janus-faced discourse between the sexes in France. In addition, Lahontan chastises the sexism of French society by noting that only women bear the social costs of adultery, whereas men are often celebrated for their sexual prowess (226–27). In the New World, he argues, marriages are more secure and infidelity is rare. Moreover, in a critique of church doctrine on divorce, Lahontan notes appreciatively that, among the Huron, when marriages unravel, divorce can be initiated by either men or women for no other reason than a desire to become single again (120). In addition, the power of fathers to choose, or to veto, their daughters' potential mate in Europe is absent, Lahontan asserts, among Amerindians (222–23). Instead, he continues, young women are given complete autonomy to choose or to consent to potential husbands. The tendency for some reflections upon the New World to evoke relatively egalitarian ideas about gender relations arises again in some of Diderot's commentary about Tahitian society in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*. Other passages of the *Supplément*, however, and a number of Rousseau's assertions about women demonstrate that Amerindian peoples could inspire just as easily more traditional responses to the heated eighteenth-century debates about women's capacities and what roles they occupy, and ought to occupy, in society.

Since the idea of a radical difference between European and indigenous New World peoples—a difference in kind between natural and artificial societies—is a presumption of Lahontan's entire dialogue and of noble savage writings more generally, the simple fact of what was taken to be exotic difference did not in and of itself make a foreign society praiseworthy or useful for the purpose of social criticism. In contrast to political writings that incorporated the themes of noble savagery, the praise of the 'other' suggested by a variety of modern European thinkers' invocation of China consisted usually of lauding its ancient and sophisticated civilization. Whereas Lahontan and others praised the New World for embodying the values of naturalism, philosophers such as Voltaire, Leibniz, and the Leibnizian rationalist Christian Wolff placed China in the noble rank of a super-civilization, an extraordinary site of rationality incarnate with a political system overseen by enlightened mandarins, in contrast to the absolute despots who sat on most European thrones. Rather than attempt to civilize the New World, Leibniz suggested wryly in his *No-*

*vissima Sinica* (1697) that China ought to send missionaries to Europe.<sup>16</sup> To undermine such enthusiasm, Adario, in response to Lahontan's boast that the Chinese and Siamese who visit France appear to admire its civilization, castigates the Far East as even more interest-oriented, propertied, and hence even more brutish than Europe (210–13). Rousseau closely follows this line of thinking in the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (1750). From one angle, he criticizes civilization and its supposed wisdom by reference to the New World: "those happy Nations which do not know even by name the vices we have so much difficulty in repressing, those savages of America whose simple and natural polity Montaigne unhesitatingly prefers . . . to everything that Philosophy could ever imagine as most perfect for the government of Peoples". From another angle, he employs the resonant image of oriental despotism: "If the Sciences purified morals, if they taught men to shed their blood for the Fatherland, if they animated courage, then the Peoples of China should be wise, free, and invincible. But if there is not a single vice that does not rule them. . . . [w]hat benefits has China derived from all the honours bestowed upon them? To be peopled by slaves and evil-doers?"<sup>17</sup> The twin themes of the praiseworthy naturalness of New World peoples and the artificial despotism of Asia make clear, of course, the extent to which the ethnography about the non-European world gave European thinkers almost ready-made vehicles for their own political outlooks, predetermined, it would appear, by their antecedent beliefs about the practices and institutions of European societies. To be sure, noble savage writings, in particular, usually aimed not only to use New World ethnography to engage in political debates about Europe, but also to humanize New World peoples. Lahontan attacks the injustices of European life as well as those Europeans who have denigrated and barbarized New World peoples. The former strategy gains rhetorical power and a seeming empirical validity by pointing to supposedly natural beings in the actual world, but ultimately at the expense of the latter strategy. For Lahontan's writings (and, as we will see, Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*) make or presuppose philosophical arguments about human nature and its relationship to culture that undermine the claim that New World peoples are fully human beings.

The paradoxical understanding of New World peoples' mental capacities in the noble savage literature discloses itself sharply in Lahontan's writings. As Lahontan's discussion of natural religion implies, Amerindians are fundamentally rational creatures. It is precisely this standard of rationality that Europeans fail to practise, given their prejudices, superstitions, and their superfluous and often degrading institutions and practices. On this view, an understanding of "natural" New World societies can enlighten Europe. Describing his approach toward understanding Amerindians, Lahontan notes that he attempts to steer a middle course

between theologians who view them as incapable of reflection (and, thus, impossible to convert), and those, especially the Jesuits, who assert that they warmly embrace the Gospels (92). The former denies Amerindians the cognitive abilities that they quite clearly possess; the latter is mistaken since, in addition to appearing wholly satisfied with their lives, they seem, Lahontan contends, to abhor Christianity and the practices of European civilization. Lahontan's fictional Huron, Adario, is an especially perceptive interlocutor because he is portrayed to be, as the title of the *Dialogues* informs us, "well travelled". We learn that he has viewed English America and even France itself with his own eyes; his criticisms, then, are supposed to gain a credibility they may have lacked without such wide exposure. But Adario's powers of reason and speech are perfectly ordinary and typical of less cosmopolitan Amerindians, Lahontan insists, for when criticizing European life, they all prove themselves to be "great moralists" [*grands Moralistes*], drawing upon an extraordinary memory and employing impressive argumentative skills (104; also, 95–104). They speak acutely, with subtlety and imagination, in tribal council meetings during which matters of communal interest are at stake. It appears, at such moments, that they lead an artful and cultivated life, one that may be different from European peoples, but not fundamentally different, or different in kind. Yet, Lahontan's attempts to humanize Amerindians cannot stray too far from the notion that they are natural, largely free of the corrupting trappings of artifice. As we have seen, like other noble savage writings, the bulk of his social criticism rests upon the claim that such peoples live purely naturally, or very nearly so. Hence, he suggests that New World peoples reason and deliberate well *despite* "having no advantage of education"; these "truly rustic philosophers", in short, must be "directed only by the pure light of nature" (99).

The tensions raised by such comments result from Lahontan's practice of describing Amerindians' various customs, rituals, myths, and social practices at length without also being able to interpret them as non-natural, cultural forms of activity and self-understanding. Lahontan does not treat the inheritance and creative transformation of specific traditions and self-understandings over generations as a form of "education", even though he regularly witnessed such artful activities taking place among the Huron and other peoples in French Canada. As we have seen, such a move would not be easy to make for a thinker who has invested heavily in the principal anthropological claim of noble savagery: that New World peoples—however much they appear to be situated within and transform an array of practices, beliefs, and institutions—are ultimately free from artifice. Thus, Lahontan's Adario asserts that the Huron

live quietly under the laws of instinct and innocent conduct, which wise Nature has imprinted upon our minds from our cradles. We are all of one mind; our



wills, opinions and sentiments observe an exact conformity; and thus we spend our lives with such perfect good understanding, that no disputes or suits can take place amongst us. (188)

One important consequence of such a view is that throughout his writings Lahontan easily slips from discussing the Huron, or more generally the indigenous peoples of Canada, to “savages” in general. Shorn of their distinctive cultural systems of meaning and value and reduced entirely to natural beings, Amerindians become an amorphous, undifferentiated whole, even for someone like Lahontan, who learned a great deal about Huron and Algonquin life. The danger of such a view is that, stripped of all cultural attributes, New World peoples must inevitably be presented as instinct-driven brutes whose basic humanity, though not formally denied, becomes increasingly difficult to discern. As we shall see, Rousseau’s conjectural anthropology engenders a theory of human nature and social development that quite clearly fosters such paradoxes and unintended results.

While noble savage accounts attempted in part to raise the status of New World peoples and challenged the view that such peoples are fundamentally barbaric, the portrait of such peoples as artless and purely natural (and the corresponding belief that human nature itself consists of a lack of artifice) yielded a fantastic and unreal understanding of them, one that was unlikely to produce the moral understanding and commiseration necessary for a thoroughgoing criticism of their subject status under European imperial power. David Hume’s reaction to such accounts, focusing on the fact that supposedly natural beings in distant lands exhibit only virtues and no vices, and also emphasizing that such narratives usually portrayed such people as lacking ambition (and, one might add, lacking all of the artfulness that ambition was thought to be linked with in many eighteenth-century political writings), was precisely what noble savage writers inadvertently helped to foster:

Should a traveller, returning from a far country, bring us an account of men, wholly different from any with whom we were ever acquainted; men, who were entirely divested of avarice, ambition, or revenge; who knew no pleasure but friendship, generosity, and public spirit; we should immediately, from these circumstances, detect the falsehood, and prove him a liar, with the same certainty as if he had stuffed his narration with stories of centaurs and dragons, miracles and prodigies.<sup>18</sup>

Such a conception of foreign peoples was not only fanciful, Hume implied, but would also be clearly inhuman. Indeed, understandings of New World peoples as *cultural* beings were more likely to yield a robust affirmation of their status as *human* beings—this is borne out, I will

argue, both in the philosophical anthropologies of Diderot, Kant, and Herder, and concomitantly in their anti-imperialist political theories. Conversely, the *Realpolitik* of many of Lahontan's analyses of French imperial policies demonstrates that a noble savage celebration of Amerindian life not only sits alongside aggressive colonial schemes, but without as much contradiction as one might originally have thought. In the *New Voyages*, Lahontan argues against the complete "destruction" of the Iroquois not because of humanitarian concerns, but rather due to the probability that the enemies of the Iroquois would then turn against New France. Thus, Lahontan recommends playing off various Amerindian nations against one another. Ultimately, New France can sufficiently weaken the Iroquois and bring them into line, he argues, by virtually imprisoning them on a plot of land guarded by forts in order to "distress" them in times of war and "confine" them in times of peace. This should, Lahontan promises, "reduce them to one half of the power they now possess".<sup>19</sup> These elements of Lahontan's political thought place his glorification of Amerindians in a different light, and it indicates what were usually the ethical limits of such perspectives about humanity and New World peoples. In the eighteenth century, the full recognition of non-Europeans as humans who should rule themselves and who are in no need of European imperial rule takes root almost always among thinkers whose understandings of humanity explicitly or tacitly reject the tenets of noble savagery.

### New World Peoples in Rousseau's Conjectural History

In the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* [*Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men*] (1755), Rousseau contends that "[a]lthough the inhabitants of Europe have for the past three or four hundred years overrun the other parts of the world, and are constantly publishing new collections of travels and reports, I am convinced that the only men we know are the Europeans" (212).<sup>20</sup> Rousseau's complaint stems from his belief that the only way one can begin to understand humanity as such is to examine the broadest possible array of human diversity. As he notes in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, the

great failing of Europeans is always to philosophize . . . in the light of what happens right around them. . . . When one proposes to study men, one has to look close by; but in order to study man one has to learn to cast one's glance afar; one has to begin by observing the differences in order to discover the properties.<sup>21</sup>

Given the increasingly vast range of cultural information housed in the travel literature of his day and the opportunities that it offered for a more accurate conception of humanity, Rousseau bemoaned the lack of a rigorous, philosophical study of such human diversity. Instead, he insists, one finds a mere chronicling of characters and mores in travel accounts without an attendant appreciation of the anthropological significance of such diversity, of how they might contribute to an understanding of the shared humanity of, and the genuine differences among, all peoples. Consequently, he argues that scholars' learned studies of human nature, even those that ostensibly draw upon the new knowledge of non-European peoples, are merely treatises about their own nations.

Rousseau argues that those who undertake the arduous journey to the New World produce anthropologically disappointing reports because of their prejudices, primarily those of their nation and of their particular occupation. "Sailors, Merchants, and Soldiers", he asserts, are hardly able to pronounce judgements of any philosophical import because of their narrow perspectives.<sup>22</sup> The fourth kind of traveller, the missionaries, perhaps have the educational training necessary for an incisive study of humanity, but, he cautiously notes, they are too "absorbed by the sublime vocation" of religious conversion to partake in a scholarly study of humanity. Indeed, according to Rousseau, the philosophical acumen required for such a study is rare even among those with the appropriate training and intellectual skills. All this leads him to call desperately for a profound meditation upon human diversity:

Shall we never see reborn the happy times when Peoples did not pretend to Philosophize, but the Platos, the Thales, and the Pythagorases, seized with an ardent desire to know, undertook the greatest journeys merely in order to learn, and went far off to shake the yoke of National prejudices, to get to know men by their conformities and their differences, and to acquire that universal knowledge that is not exclusively of one Century or of one country but of all times and of all places, and thus is, so to speak, the common science of the wise? (213)

This yearning for the wisdom of ancient philosophers, in contrast to the tracts of "Europeans more interested in filling their purses than their heads", did not prevent Rousseau from appropriating a significant amount of material from modern travel writings. Indeed, it is not often noted that his celebrated call for a more genuinely philosophical appreciation of humanity and human diversity in note X of the *Discourse on Inequality* arises in the context of his attack upon travel writers' assertions that orangutans are not human—a claim not unrelated to his presentation of Amerindians (as we will see)—rather than from a concern about distorted judgements or understandings of New World peoples. Despite

his misgivings, then, about the travel writings of his day, Rousseau drew upon them frequently. He also related many of the tropes of the then well-established philosophical and literary image of the noble savage to lend empirical support for what he knew would be controversial claims about natural humans.

The method that informs Rousseau's speculative history and the developmental sequence that he elaborates begin to explain the peculiar roles that New World peoples play in his narrative. Rousseau defends a theory of human nature that owes much to the tradition of noble savagery, but as part of an extended conjectural history that outlines stages of human development. Although he often simply contrasts "savage" and "civilized" life, Rousseau's conjectural history in fact outlines three stages of human development that mark distinct historical phases of social activity, scientific and technological complexity, and institutional development: a primordial condition (a pure state of nature); a primitive, middle stage; and the civilized condition of modern Europeans, a variety of ancient peoples, and some sedentary non-European peoples, such as the Chinese, who practise agriculture and metallurgy.<sup>23</sup>

On the assumption that the behavioural patterns, social institutions, and the political machinery of modern peoples are *artificial* constructs that have masked, or even altered, our underlying humanity, Rousseau asks in the preface to the *Discourse on Inequality*:

how will man ever succeed in seeing himself as Nature formed him, through all the changes which the succession of times and of things must have wrought in his original constitution, and to disentangle what he owes to his own stock from what circumstances and his progress have added to or changed in his primitive state? (122)

Rousseau explicates his method by using the imagery of the statue of Glaucus, so encrusted and warped by the ravages of the seas, storms, and time that it resembles more a "ferocious beast" than a God (122). Rousseau's account of natural humans is the result, then, of peeling away the layers of society and culture that, in his view, obscure humans' underlying, universal nature. Such a thought-experiment reveals that the most fundamental characteristics of human behaviour are self-preservation and sympathy, or pity, for other sentient beings. After contending that previous political thinkers who used the category of the state of nature did not go back far enough in human history to describe a truly natural, precivil human condition, he describes at length an earlier state of nature that exemplifies these two essential springs of human action. Rousseau's natural humans preserve themselves without the fixed order of law and government because of their *amour de soi*, a peaceable self-love that involves no comparison or needless competition with others. For Rousseau,

primordial humans' solitary existence is peaceful because of the bounty of their environment, their simple (that is, their natural, nonartificial) needs and desires, and their hard-wired (instinctive, natural) repugnance against human suffering. Given the method that informs his speculative history, it becomes clear why New World ethnography, as filtered through the lens of noble savagery, offered ideal resources for such an account of human origins. By removing from the distorted figure of 'civilized man' the purportedly corrupting layers of science, technology, art, sociability, and even language, in addition to the psychological states and passions that Rousseau contends they breed, the figure that remains is the natural human, a noble savage thoroughly free of artificiality.

Rousseau emphasizes in the exordium to the *Discourse* that the "[i]nquiries that may be pursued regarding this Subject ought not be taken for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings; better suited to elucidate the Nature of things than to show their genuine origin" (133). Yet, in detailing the precivilized condition of humanity, Rousseau makes frequent use of the real-world examples of savages in order to bolster his assertions about 'savage man'. The confusion that results is indicative precisely of the tensions that run through the tradition of noble savagery, where thinkers would both trumpet the pure and largely animalistic naturalness of Amerindians while also at times detailing cognitive and institutional features of Amerindian life. In the context of Rousseau's developmental account, the related paradoxes arise because he categorizes New World peoples as part of the middle stage, while also using them to substantiate a number of his claims about the earlier, pure state of nature.

The movement from a pure state of nature to the middle stage, in Rousseau's conjectural history, involves the development of language, the transition from an entirely nomadic existence to an occasionally sedentary life, the origin of a limited amount of private property (largely in the form of objects that can be carried, rather than of land itself), the formation of family units, and the gradual emergence of nations that are "united in morals and character, not by Rules or Laws, but by the same kind of life and of foods, and the influence of a shared Climate." (169) Rousseau did not believe that a middle, post-primordial and precivilized, state was entirely free of corruption and conflict. Once humans become social creatures, in his view, a corruption of their natural, purely instinctive characteristics inevitably follows. The psychological transformation wrought by such behavioural and sociological changes is significant because they give birth to *amour propre*, or vanity, the vice at the heart of modern unhappiness and social injustice. Thus, Rousseau notes that violence is not uncommon among New World peoples, just as it is embedded, though far more pervasively, in European societies. Nevertheless,

New World peoples lead generally praiseworthy lives, for having reached only the middle stage of human development, they are still restrained partly by natural pity for other creatures. In *On the Social Contract*, he asserts that Amerindians practise a form of government that can best be classified as a “natural aristocracy”, for their rulers are elders who are thus naturally unequal to others by virtue of the “authority of experience”, rather than civilized aristocrats, who rule according to “instituted inequalities” such as “riches”. He concludes that “[t]he savages of northern America still govern themselves this way in our day, and they are very well governed.” (406) Most importantly, Rousseau argues that New World peoples are free of two pernicious technological developments—large-scale agriculture (and, in tandem with this, they lack a more extensive and fixed system of private property holdings) and metallurgy—which rely upon and breed a high level of interdependence that in turn signals the death knell of human independence and freedom (171–72). For Rousseau, most peoples of the New World live at precisely the “just mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of our vanity [*amour propre*]”, a period during which humans are happiest and a condition that, simply stated, is the “best for man” (171).

Rousseau argues that the post-primordial, precivilized stage is not an ephemeral historical epoch that was achieved for a stunning but tragically brief moment. Instead, this relatively ideal form of human organization constituted the most stable, longest-lasting era of human history. He suggests that the very discovery of New World peoples at this level of social and technological development as late as the eighteenth century demonstrates its impressive durability. He writes that the

example of the Savages, almost all of whom have been found at this point, seems to confirm that the Human Race [*le Genre-Humain*] was made always to remain in it, that this state is the genuine youth of the World, and that all subsequent progress has been so many steps in appearance toward the perfection of the individual, and in effect toward the decrepitude of the species. (171)

Given Rousseau’s stark pessimism about the advanced stage of anthropological development and the fact that it might never have been reached but for a string of contingent factors, the fall from the relatively peaceful and content middle state constitutes the greatest tragedy of human history. As Rousseau explains in *On the Social Contract*, the establishment of a “civil state” would constitute genuine, unalloyed progress were it not for the degradation that civilized life engenders. The brute existence of the state of nature led to a civilized condition in which natural, animalistic beings who possessed a set of social virtues and faculties in potentiality (because of their ‘perfectibility’) happened to become, through a series of

random occurrences that were by no means predestined, intelligent but also almost thoroughly corrupted and oppressed humans.

Although in this [civil] state he deprives himself of several advantages he has from nature, he gains such great advantages in return, his faculties are exercised and developed, his ideas enlarged, his sentiments ennobled, his entire soul is elevated to such an extent, that if the abuses of this new condition did not often degrade him to beneath the condition he has left, he should ceaselessly bless the happy moment which wrested him from it forever, and out of a stupid and bounded animal made an intelligent being and a man. (364)

For this reason, Rousseau suggests that the arrival of the middle stage constitutes genuine progress, for it lacks the most egregious injustices of the civilized stage. A degree of humanization occurs in the movement toward the middle stage as the distinctively human faculty of perfectibility begins its operations, but without the corresponding dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty, artificial inequalities, illness and disease, interdependence, and ultimately the despotic slavishness of the civilized stage.

Rousseau acknowledges that such a judgement is tantamount to the glorification of a golden age, one that exists far in Europe's past, but that continues to exist among the largely nomadic peoples of the Americas and Africa. In the "Last Reply" to the critics of his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, he scorns the corrupt modern individuals who reject the notion of a golden age by asserting that in doing so they treat virtue itself as a mere fantasy: "I am told that men have long since been disabused of the chimera of the Golden Age. Why not also add that they have long since been disabused of the chimera of virtue?" (80) Indeed, the golden age and Rousseau's idealized presentation of the ancient city-state Sparta are the twin, and (as Judith Shklar has noted) in certain respects the mutually exclusive, exemplary ideals that animate much of his social and political thinking.<sup>24</sup> As with many earlier theorists of noble savagery, Rousseau asserts that the middle stage of human history cannot be resurrected in Europe, for the social and psychological changes that arise with the development of civilized societies are too great to be undone by an attempt to return to the rustic happiness of the golden age. Still, much of Rousseau's thought can be interpreted as a series of attempts to revive certain aspects of this age. One such attempt involves re-creating in the modern world, *mutatis mutandis*, elements of the life of a rustic city-state (see *On the Social Contract* and, to a lesser extent, *Considerations on the Government of Poland*). Another involves fashioning a less corrupt life in the midst of civilized society either by a highly regimented education from birth that attempts to inculcate and foster the natural sentiments that still animate (without any such education) the indigenous inhabit-

ants of the New World (see, e.g., *Emile*, and *Emile et Sophie*), or by becoming an outsider on the margins of society whose immersion in the natural world provides a form of self-therapy (see, e.g., *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*).

To defend the empirical grounding that he had given in support of the middle stage, Rousseau challenges the common view that New World societies are sites of brutal passions and cruel social practices. Writings that extolled noble savages were always secondary in influence to pejorative understandings of the New World, the most detailed of which aimed not only to proclaim but also to explain the allegedly backward conditions and barbaric behaviour of Amerindians. Along with what can be termed *internal* explanations of their status and behaviour (of the kind that Francisco de Vitoria attacked, such as the view that Amerindians are examples of Aristotle's natural slaves), New World peoples were further encumbered, some argued, by *external* factors, the most important of which was climate.<sup>25</sup> Climate, a key concept in pre-nineteenth-century European social thought, was an umbrella category of the various characteristics of local environments (ranging from meteorological factors, such as the amount of sunshine and heat, to the landscape and other geographical features) that were said to shape social practices, psychological dispositions, and even political institutions.<sup>26</sup> Among French thinkers of the eighteenth century, Montesquieu was by far the most influential proponent of climatological social analysis. A lengthy section of *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) is devoted exclusively to the behavioural and institutional effects of climate. With regard to moral behaviour, Montesquieu's analysis focused upon the purported effects of heat on the passions:

You will find in the northern climates peoples who have few vices, enough virtues, and much sincerity and frankness. As you move toward the countries of the south, you will believe you have moved away from morality itself: the liveliest passions will increase crime; each will seek to take from others all the advantages that can favour these same passions.<sup>27</sup>

Such theories grounded a common view of most New World and also African peoples: physiologically, the torrid climates in which they lived boiled their "humours" (and consequently their passions) to degrees uncontrollable by their presumed meagre rationality. In this view, then, the combination of two structural constraints, one external (climate) and one internal to New World inhabitants' constitutions (their ostensibly limited cognitive powers), together were said to account for the barbarous social practices described in many New World travel writings.

In response to such charges of barbarism, Rousseau finds it "ridiculous to portray Savages as constantly murdering one another in order to satisfy their brutality" (158). Despite his scepticism toward those who assert



that Amerindians are prone to violence because of their nature, their environment, or both, Rousseau does not deny the effects of climate on human behaviour. Indeed, the very need for a philosophical account of humanity, he maintains, stems from the “powerful effects of differences in Climates, air, foods, ways of life, habits in general and, above all, of the astonishing force of uniform causes acting continuously on long successions of generations.” (208) It is for precisely this reason that, for Rousseau, theorizing a fully natural human existence requires stripping away the layers of social and cultural particularities to discern the pure elements of humanity, for modern individuals have been warped almost beyond recognition by a multiplicity of such contingent factors. Consequently, Rousseau attacks the view that primitive peoples are cruel and ferocious while, at the same time, accepting the climatology that had often supported the traditional representation of New World peoples. Thus, referring to the Caribs in particular, he asserts that they are “the most peaceful in their loves and the least given to jealousy, even though they live in a scorching Climate, which always seems to stir these passions to greater activity.” (158)

Rousseau suggests that to the extent that episodes of cruelty and violence occur within noncivilized communities, they result not from the lack of civilization, but because the changes that might lead to a civilized condition have started to develop. Life in the middle stage has not yet reached the wretched interdependence of European civilization, and thus it constitutes the condition “best for man”, but it is far from the natural isolation of a pure state of nature, which is the only sure guarantee of a complete freedom from cruelty in human life. The historical, and concomitant psychological, development from a purely natural condition, not the want of purportedly civilizing or refining elements of modern life, accounts for whatever strains of cruelty exist in primitive communities. Amerindians are sometimes cruel to one another because they have reached the stage of anthropological development at which one is exposed to the early stirrings of *amour propre*. Therefore, according to Rousseau, before too much civilization (and the interdependence it breeds) corrupts human life, the natural sentiment that makes doing evil repugnant to humans continues to counteract even the most powerful—and potentially degrading—climatic and social factors (156). As with its predecessors, noble savagery in its Rousseauian version, then, offered a counterpoint to the most pejorative understandings of New World peoples. In addition, Rousseau sought to balance his praise of the middle stage of human history, and concomitantly his celebration of New World peoples, with the understanding that such peoples had already been partly corrupted by the early development of sociability.

With a couple of exceptions (such as the Mexica, whom he categorizes as civilized in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* [5:386]), Rousseau claims then that New World peoples exist at a middle stage of anthropological development. Accordingly, he acknowledges that even the Caribs, “which of all existing Peoples have so far departed least from the state of Nature” (158), are not entirely natural humans. Still, the tension that tends to surface in noble savage accounts—between theorizing an acultural (and, in Rousseau’s case, also an asocial) natural human and celebrating the qualities of New World inhabitants as praiseworthy humans (who are not different in kind, but simply closer to the pure conditions of natural humanity than civilized humans)—arises also in Rousseau’s conjectural history. For despite his explicit categorization of New World inhabitants as peoples who exist in the middle stage of human development, Rousseau most often discusses Amerindians and the Hottentots of southern Africa to support his account of purely natural humans in the original state of nature. Rousseau’s speculative history may well conclude that the middle stage of development is the “best for man”, but the earliest state of nature occupies a special place in his theory since it provides the starkest contrast between modern humans and human nature itself. Moreover, only an appreciation of natural humanity, in his view, can ultimately provide the basis for understanding the laws that motivate humanity or that should govern humanity: “so long as we do not know natural man, we shall in vain try to ascertain either the Law which he has received or that which best suits his constitution.” (125) Thus, while he presents the pure state of nature as a period so far back in the history of humanity that no written records can attest to its features, the documents that detail the life of indigenous New World inhabitants offer a wealth of examples to support his conjectures about the original state of nature. One can only speculate as to the motivations behind this use of New World ethnography, given its inconsistency with Rousseau’s own categorization of Amerindians. Nonetheless, given the influence of the writers from the noble savage tradition upon Rousseau, it should perhaps come as no surprise that natural humans and New World peoples would, in effect, be equated in his account of human nature. As the *Discourse on Inequality* demonstrates, Rousseau moves easily from discussing the ‘savages’ of the pure state of nature to the ‘savages’ of contemporary New World societies. Natural, or savage, existence—*la vie sauvage*—can, in part, be accurately described for Rousseau by studying savage, or primitive, humans, *les hommes Sauvage*. Thus, precisely in the manner of the noble savage tradition, Rousseau often cites New World peoples as examples of the impressive *physical* and meagre *mental* qualities of natural humanity. In addition, since Rousseau tends to conflate the

boundary between New World humans and animals in this manner, his converse attempt to place orangutans at the level of natural humanity becomes especially noteworthy.

*Physical qualities of natural humanity.* The opening passages of the first part of the *Discourse on Inequality*, those meant to discern natural humans simply from their “physical” side before considering them from the “metaphysical and moral side”, rely greatly upon New World ethnography to provide empirical evidence about the physical prowess of natural humans in the wild (141). To the extent that any animal becomes domesticated, argues Rousseau, it becomes timid and weak, lacking its original courage and vigour (139). After detailing the sharpness of sense and acuity of judgement of wild animals who live primarily according to self-preservation, Rousseau concludes, “Such is the animal state in general, and according to Travellers’ reports, it also is the state of most Savage peoples.” (140–41) Accordingly, Rousseau notes that “the Savages of America track the Spaniards by smell just as well as the best Dogs might have done” (141).

Rousseau’s notes at the end of the *Discourse on Inequality* provide much of the ethnographic material that is meant to support his historical conjectures. Although most of the main text details the injustices of the civilized condition, sixteen of Rousseau’s nineteen notes aim to elaborate and substantiate his claims about the pure state of nature and the middle stage of human development. In note VI, which marks one of the most intensive uses of travel literature in the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau lists several examples of indigenous peoples’ physical vigour and skill, from the Hottentots’ fishing, hunting, and running and the accurate shooting of the “Savages of the Antilles” to the general strength and physical skills of the “Savages” and “Indians” of both North and South America. In note V, drawing upon François Corréal’s *Voyage aux Indes Occidentales* (1722), Rousseau defends his thesis that humans are naturally vegetarian in part by relating the story of the primitive inhabitants of Lucayes, who, removed by the Spanish from their homes and taken to Cuba, Santo Domingo, and elsewhere, died because of eating meat; such “natural” physiologies, Rousseau implies, could not handle animal flesh (199). In note III, Rousseau uses both indigenous peoples and feral children to study the question of whether humans are naturally bipeds or quadrupeds. After noting that humans must *teach* their children to walk on two limbs, Rousseau asserts that since Caribs and the Hottentots both “neglect” their children by keeping them as quadrupeds for so long, for them, learning to become bipeds requires considerable effort. Even their adults, he writes, are sometimes found as quadrupeds. Rousseau con-

siders the feral children of Europe, abandoned children who were discovered in rural areas and who often generated sensational publicity, as guides to the study of human nature.<sup>28</sup> Surviving in remote areas, and at times like the legendary Romulus and Remus allegedly raised by animals, feral children often elicited an enthusiastic response after their discovery in part because of their apparently ‘natural’ qualities. As if placed by fate in a laboratory experiment in which all the conventions of social life were eliminated, the feral child ostensibly exhibited the most primal, underlying characteristics of the human species. Accordingly, Rousseau cites five examples of feral children in order to elaborate the possibility that humans are naturally quadrupeds. In one passage, then, Rousseau manages to equate savages (understood as the earliest purely natural individuals of his conjectural history), the “Savage Nations” of the New World, and feral children (such as the “little Savage of Hanover”) as natural creatures (196). Rousseau’s frequent reliance upon supposedly empirical examples of “savages” in such cases indicates not only the centrality of New World ethnographic sources in his effort to discern humans’ natural physical characteristics, but also the virtual animalization of New World peoples, however unintended, that this method risks.

*Mental qualities of natural humanity.* In conjunction with the physical animality of natural humans, Rousseau attempts to establish the *mental* simplicity of “savages” as well. It is important in his account, as it is so often in narratives of natural humanity and noble savagery, to defend the idea that the virtues of such lives result not from forms of education, institutions, or self-conscious and dynamic social practices, or indeed from any other form of what was understood to constitute artificiality, but rather from the uncorrupted instincts (or, for Lahontan and others, the laws) that Nature itself implanted in humans. Hence, Rousseau asserts that “one might say that Savages are not wicked precisely because they do not know what it is to be good; for it is neither the growth of enlightenment nor the curb of the Law, but the calm of the passions and the ignorance of vice that keep them from evil-doing” (154). Although the humans of the middle, precivilized stage lead partly settled lives with minimal amounts of private property, produce simple commodities, and thus undergo significant psychological changes and the development of a rudimentary sociability, he also argues that this middle stage is remarkably durable partly because such humans have not yet reached the cognitive state in which the imagination, curiosity, and foresight needed for deep reflection and for scientific and technological advances (in short, for the more extensive flourishing of human perfectibility) exists. In such a condition, humans have minimal (and still largely natural) needs that are

met by subsistence hunting and gathering and, at times, small-scale agriculture. Their minds work constantly at what is before them, never abstracting from their own life or looking ahead to future events.

After elaborating such speculative claims about proto-civilized humans, Rousseau again illustrates them by noting the example of a New World people:

Such is still nowadays the extent of the Carib's foresight: he sells his Cotton bed in the morning and comes weeping to buy it back in the evening, having failed to foresee that he would need it for the coming night. (144)

Not merely primitive peoples' immediate social conditions and psychological dispositions, then, but also their cognitive abilities themselves, in Rousseau's view, exist at an elementary level, a stage that ensures little progress and therefore tremendous durability. Referring to "Savage man", he asserts that "nothing must be so calm as his soul and nothing so limited as his mind." (214) The physical prowess that Rousseau describes with such relish—single-handedly subduing wild bulls, striking distant and minute targets with stones, and swimming flawlessly in turbulent waters—all come at a price. This praise sits alongside Rousseau's contentions that Amerindians' impressive physical characteristics flourish precisely because their mental capacity cannot go beyond the simple association of basic ideas at their stage of historical development. Any higher form of reflection would lead to, and in part be a result of, interdependent social practices that over time would enervate humans' original, vigorous constitutions. Thus, the animality of natural humans is not only of the body, but of the mind as well. As with other noble savage representations of non-European peoples, the analytic ability to make lasting connections between sets of ideas—in short, sustained cognitive reflection—is nearly as absent in the human beings of the New World as it is in any of the animals of the wild.

*Orangutans as natural humans?* Since Rousseau's conjectural history conflates the boundary between the middle stage and what he himself describes as the animal condition of the earliest state of nature, it is not entirely astonishing to read his speculation that certain primates may very well be human beings.<sup>29</sup> Rousseau's representation of most New World peoples mirrors, therefore, his anthropomorphic conception of recently discovered primates. In note X of the *Discourse on Inequality*, he contends at length that orangutans, in particular, might be extant examples of the earliest and most primitive humans. After quoting a few passages about primates from one of his most frequent sources about non-European societies, Abbé Prévost's twenty-volume compendium, *Histoire Générale des Voyages*, Rousseau argues against travellers' accounts that

orangutans are definitively nonhuman.<sup>30</sup> These “Anthropomorphic animals”, he argues, are so physically and even behaviourally similar to humans that “it is because of their stupidity” that voyagers have typically described them simply as animals (210). Rousseau muses sarcastically that if the travellers who make such claims had discovered a feral child with a human form but hardly any ability to reason or to speak, they “would have spoken about him learnedly in fine reports as a most curious Beast that rather resembled a man.” (212)

Rousseau considers orangutans as likely humans in part because it was not adequately demonstrated, in his opinion, that they lack *perfectibilité*, the faculty of self-perfection that is a “specific characteristic of the human species.” (211) In addition, Rousseau attempts to rebut the one argument that, in his view, is usually given to justify the assertion that orangutans are not humans: their lack of speech. In a claim about the history of human language, which he elaborates in detail in the unpublished *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (much of which was originally intended to be part of the second *Discourse*), Rousseau notes that orangutans’ lack of any humanly comprehensible speech tells us nothing about the species to which they belong because the act of speech itself is not natural to humans. The earliest humans, in Rousseau’s account, possess the “organ of speech” in an incipient form that then develops slowly in conjunction with a variety of social and psychological changes. Thus, orangutans—the word derives etymologically from two Malay words meaning “man of the woods”—could very well be examples of the earliest humans who managed to stay entirely uncultivated by dispersing themselves in remote forests eons ago (208). If this were true, then New World peoples presumably would no longer be the eighteenth-century humans best suited to model the original state of nature, since the primordial state itself would still be in existence in the forests of Asia. He notes cautiously, however, that with the dearth of information about, and lack of experimentation with, such creatures, his thoughts on this matter are purely speculative.<sup>31</sup> Notwithstanding such qualifications, Rousseau never retracts his orangutan hypothesis and consistently voices scepticism over travellers’ judgements to the contrary. By the end of the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau manages both to humanize certain animals and, though it was clearly not his purpose, to animalize certain humans. Both sets of creatures living in the wild or savage regions of the world come, therefore, to resemble one another.

THIS CURIOUS FEATURE of Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality* becomes understandable when one considers the paradoxes underlying the tradition of noble savagery to which Rousseau’s ‘natural man’ owes so much. Much of the admiration for New World peoples in this literature, as we have seen, concerns what is considered to be purely natural about them—

features that are often animalistic. Rousseau, of course, did not call for European societies to return either to the golden age he represented or, for that matter, to the condition of orangutans. The social and psychological changes that take place from one stage to the next, in his view, are too deep to allow for such movement. Although it is correct to note that Rousseau is therefore not a 'primitivist', it would be a mistake to conclude from this that Rousseau's treatment of New World peoples constitutes a fundamental departure from the noble savage doctrine.<sup>32</sup> Noble savage thinkers, such as Lahontan, tended to naturalize and animalize Amerindians in precisely the same manner as Rousseau—that is, without arguing that Europeans should, in some sense, return to the forests. It is the particular characterization of New World peoples, rather than the claim that humans should abandon civilization, that most accurately typifies what can be characterized as noble savagery, the tradition of theorizing New World peoples that most influenced Rousseau. On balance, there is no doubt that Rousseau considered New World peoples to be simple, but not wholly natural. He makes clear in the *Discourse on Inequality* that Amerindians and Hottentots, for example, occupy his middle stage of anthropological development. The paradox of his treatment of such peoples is that of the entire tradition of noble savagery: New World peoples are meant both to illustrate a pure humanity free of artifice and culture (and sometimes, as with Rousseau, free of all sociability), while they are also occasionally praised for their conventional practices and norms, such as martial virtue or the eloquence of their speech. Since New World peoples are meant to provide a foil to 'civilized' societies, the manner in which they are portrayed in noble savage accounts tends to veer back and forth between wholly naturalistic and cultural descriptions; they are said to be superior or happier usually because they lead natural lives, yet at times their nobility reveals itself in artificial conventions that are less corrupt or more egalitarian than those of Europe. Hence, they are usually categorized as different in kind and also at times as different in degree, that is, as beings who are also artificial or cultural, but more simply and decently so. As we have seen in Rousseau's account, this is evident in the manner in which he categorizes most New World peoples as occupying his middle stage, but nonetheless uses them most often to illustrate features of the earliest state of nature.

Notwithstanding the influence of the noble savage tradition upon Rousseau, he moves beyond previous accounts by conceptualizing New World peoples within a philosophically sophisticated speculative history that aims not merely to contrast savage and civilized life, but also to hypothesize at length about the complex development of injustice and inequality. In this respect, Rousseau exerts an enormous influence over Diderot, who would appropriate much of Rousseau's conjectural history

and the incisive social criticism of European society that it made possible, while also rejecting the naturalistic (that is, the noble savage) elements of his philosophical anthropology. Moreover, like Montaigne, Rousseau was by no means indifferent to the imperial politics of his day. While expressions of sympathy toward the plight of New World peoples and criticism of the injustices of European imperial rule only infrequently emerge in Rousseau's writings, his contempt and anger toward the European subjugation of New World peoples is noteworthy. To be sure, Rousseau's early opera *La Découverte du Nouveau Monde* [*The Discovery of the New World*] offers not only praise for Amerindians' natural virtue and courage, but also a triumphal account of Columbus and the conquest of the New World, with the chorus declaring at the opening of the second act that the New World "is made for our chains".<sup>33</sup> This early writing (whose composition has been dated between 1739 and 1741) should not be taken, however, as a guide to his thinking about empire, given that it was not intended to offer a political analysis of imperial rule and especially since it precedes his turn toward more systematic and direct discussions of history, society, and politics. More significant is Rousseau's characterization of "the odious Cortés subjugating Mexico with powder, treachery and betrayal" in the "Last Reply" to the critics of the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (91). Responding to his critics' view that "barbarians" engage in conquest because they are "most unjust", Rousseau writes,

What, pray, were we during our so greatly admired conquest of America? But then, how could people with artillery, naval charts, and compasses, commit injustices! Am I to be told that the outcome proves the Conquerors' valour? All it proves is their cunning and their skill; it proves that an adroit and clever man can owe to his industry the success which a brave man expects from his valour alone. (91)

Accordingly, in *On the Social Contract*, Rousseau offers the conquest of the Americas as an example of the possession of land "by a vain ceremony". As he sarcastically asks,

When Núñez Balboa, standing on the shore, took possession of the southern seas and of all of South America in the name of the crown of Castile, was that enough to dispossess all of its inhabitants and to exclude all the Princes of the world? (366)

Instead, he argues, "labour and cultivation" is the only "real sign of property which others ought to respect in the absence of legal titles." (366) While this might resemble agriculturalist arguments in favour of the appropriation of nomadic peoples' lands, in the early draft of *On the Social Contract*, now known as the *Geneva Manuscript*, Rousseau wrote a footnote ridiculing the idea that lands inhabited by nonagriculturalist



“savages” should be viewed as open, unowned land. “I saw in, I think, a work entitled the *Dutch Observer*,” he notes,

a most amusing principle [offered by Jacob Moreau in favour of the French seizure of Amerindian lands during the Seven Years’ War], which is that all land inhabited only by savages should be considered vacant, and that one may legitimately seize it and drive the inhabitants away without doing them any wrong according to natural right.” (301)

Although Rousseau chose not to include this comment in the final text, there is no evidence to suggest that he changed his mind about the common imperial classification of Amerindian land as *res nullius*, as belonging to no one.

Rousseau never pursued such scattered observations at any length in order to craft what might have been a powerful anti-imperialist political philosophy, and he thus has much in common with the many modern European thinkers who promoted the idea of a ‘natural man’, stripped of all artificial, cultural attributes, but without offering in addition a sustained criticism of European empires and defence of the New World peoples who were used as examples of such noble savages. It is a striking fact that the thoroughgoing anti-imperialist political theories and most robust accounts of the injustice of European imperialism in the history of modern European political thought were virtually always grounded by the view that humans are cultural agents, and hence the rejection of the very category of a ‘natural human’, as this was understood by noble savage thinkers. As I will further argue in the final section of this chapter, this should come as no surprise, for while concern about the oppression of non-European peoples under European imperial rule is not precluded by descriptions of New World peoples as (or as very nearly) natural and acultural, the extensive commiseration with non-European peoples and sustained criticism and outright rejection of European empires that we find, among others, in Diderot, Kant, and Herder, follows more easily from the anthropological understanding that humans as such are cultural creatures.

### Diderot and Bougainville’s *Voyage*

Diderot’s presentation of Tahitian society in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* [*Supplement to Bougainville’s Voyage*] subverts the tradition of noble savagery, even as it draws upon some of its classic tropes. Diderot was influenced by the writings that I have discussed thus far in this chapter, which together constitute an identifiable modern European philosophical tradition toward thinking about New World and other no-

madic, nonsedentary peoples. Like many of his fellow *philosophes*, Diderot viewed Montaigne as an exemplary hero whose scepticism, commitment to social criticism, and exposure of hypocrisies and injustices made him a model for enlightened thought.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Diderot was also inspired by Baron Lahontan's *Dialogues curieux*, as well as other celebrated writings that idealized the pastoral themes of noble savagery but without any explicit reference to the New World, such as Fénelon's *Télémaque* (1699).<sup>35</sup> It was, however, Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*—in which the previous two centuries of noble savagery, and its attendant, distinctive form of social criticism, were distilled and transformed into a philosophically more complex conjectural history—that most captured Diderot's imagination. Unlike Voltaire, who wrote to Rousseau shortly after the publication of the *Discourse on Inequality* only to thank him sardonically for writing a treatise “against the human race”, Diderot was moved by Rousseau's account of the origin of inequality.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the two discussed the arguments of the *Discourse* as Rousseau composed it. Diderot recognized the depth of Rousseau's vision, one that drew upon, but also went beyond, previous attempts at social criticism that were based upon golden ages and primitive, natural men. In light of this tradition of social criticism, his friendship with Rousseau, and his admiration in particular of the *Discourse on Inequality*, Diderot's *Supplément* is often understood as a standard example of eighteenth-century noble savagery, a work that presupposes its essential philosophical and anthropological assumptions, varying only in ethnography and locale—in this case, Bougainville's travel narrative, *Voyage autour du monde*, and the South Pacific islands, the New World of the eighteenth century.<sup>37</sup> In fact, Diderot's *Supplément* sets forth a doctrine of human nature, sociability, moral judgement, and human diversity that stands in sharp contrast to the tradition of noble savagery.<sup>38</sup> The political consequences of Diderot's immanent subversion of noble savage assumptions are significant because the development of his anti-imperialist political thought was enabled by precisely this rejection of the traditionally primitivist understanding of ‘natural man’.

As we have seen, when information about non-European peoples elicited genuine interest rather than contempt or puzzlement among European thinkers who were already critically disposed toward European religious and political institutions, the relevant ethnography became a weapon in the hands of such philosophers, poets, and other satirists. To the extent that such travel writings shaped the thinking of those who drew upon them, the variety of social forms and behaviour portrayed in these writings pointed to the relativity of European institutions, behaviour, and norms. In part, Rousseau's and Diderot's philosophical anthropologies sought to prove that the injustices and inequalities of European societies were not inevitable or permanent. For them, social, psychologi-

cal, and technological transformations over time demonstrate humans' self-construction and malleability.<sup>39</sup> Notwithstanding Rousseau's pessimism about humans' opportunities for the future, one normative implication of his anthropology is that humans can, within bounds, alter their political conditions for the better. Similarly, the discovery of the New World, in Diderot's view, promoted crucial advances in moral thought because its diverse practices enabled thinkers to discern that the roots of political injustice, economic exploitation, and social ills were not divinely sanctioned or historically inevitable, but "only the product of time, ignorance, weakness and deceit."<sup>40</sup> (193)

Rousseau and Diderot were both critically disposed toward the political injustices of their own societies, and their one-time friendship led to a close working relationship about such issues at the time when Rousseau was composing the two *Discourses*. As Rousseau would later explain in a letter to Malsherbes, he was struck by an epiphany—that humans are naturally good and that they themselves are to blame for the institutions that corrupted them—during a journey to visit Diderot, who at the time was in prison for having written allegedly blasphemous material. As Rousseau recalls,

I was going to see Diderot, at that time a prisoner at Vincennes; I had in my pocket a *Mercur de France* [the October 1749 issue of the popular periodical] which I began to leaf through along the way. I fell across the question of the Academy of Dijon ["Has the restoration of the Sciences and Arts tended to purify morals?"] which gave rise to my first writing. . . . Oh Sir, if I had ever been able to write a quarter of what I saw and felt under that tree, how clearly I would have made all the contradictions of the social system seen, with what strength I would have exposed all the abuses of our institutions, with what simplicity I would have demonstrated that man is naturally good and that it is from these institutions alone that men become wicked.<sup>41</sup>

As Rousseau describes it in his *Confessions*, Diderot noticed his agitation at Vincennes and, after discovering the cause, "exhorted" Rousseau to submit an essay to the Academy.<sup>42</sup> The *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* was published in 1751 and launched Rousseau's career as a writer and social critic. As Rousseau himself notes, in his letter to Malsherbes, this led almost ineluctably to the following *Discourse*, which provided a deeper philosophical and anthropological grounding for his radical criticisms. As we have seen, Rousseau uses New World travel literature most thoroughly in the course of explaining and justifying the pure state of nature in the *Discourse on Inequality*. This was a work that, as Rousseau states, "was more to Diderot's taste than all my other Writings, and for which his advice was most useful to me".<sup>43</sup> As they grew apart, Rousseau ultimately changed his view of Diderot's help, accusing him eventually of

inserting his own passages into Rousseau's text. He claimed, for instance, that Diderot had written into the *Discourse on Inequality* a passage that, Rousseau believed, made him appear harsh and overly critical.<sup>44</sup> Notwithstanding their eventual hostility toward one another, Rousseau had clearly influenced Diderot both by his use of ethnography about the non-European world and, philosophically, by his argument that the inequalities and injustices of human life were in fact humanly constructed (and, thus, amenable to human transformation), rather than rooted in the fundamental nature of human beings or human society.

Influenced by Rousseau, and most likely by Lahontan as well,<sup>45</sup> Diderot, too, engaged in a form of social criticism that drew upon New World travel literature, although, as I argue, his conceptualization of New World societies ultimately subverted the noble savage tradition, whereas Rousseau most often mirrored it. Diderot was especially captivated by the *Voyage autour du monde* [*Voyage around the world*], a travel narrative written by Louis Antoine de Bougainville, who had become the first French explorer to circumnavigate the globe, and the second European (shortly after James Cook) to visit Tahiti. At the time that he read Bougainville's book, Diderot was undertaking research for what eventually became his anti-imperialist contributions to Abbé Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes*. He had also recently completed two short stories, *Ceci n'est pas un conte* [*This is not a story*] and *Madame de La Carlière*, both of which had explored the many tensions between conventional social and religious morality and sexual desires and practices.<sup>46</sup> At first, Diderot wrote a book review of Bougainville's *Voyage*, within which he expressed outrage that Bougainville's visit to Tahiti was most likely laying the groundwork for French colonization in the South Pacific. As Diderot exclaims,

Bougainville, leave the shores of these innocent and fortunate Tahitians. They are happy and you can only harm their happiness. . . . This man whom you lay hold of as though he were a brute or a plant is a child of nature like you. What right have you over him? Let him have his morals [*moeurs*]; they are more decent and wiser than yours.<sup>47</sup>

Eventually, however, the combination of Diderot's recent literary endeavours, the ongoing development of his humanism, and the early stirrings of his anti-imperialist politics led to the composition of a more substantial work, the remarkable dialogue *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*.<sup>48</sup> Diderot's *Supplément* makes clear his view that further contacts with the New World provided an opportunity to reflect deeply and innovatively upon human unity and diversity, and in ways that could be turned against European mores and European political power. In part, the ingenuity of his response to the "discovery" of Tahiti was to construct a complex

dialogue between two Europeans (“A” and “B”) about the little-known supplement (written by Diderot himself) to Bougainville’s published travel narrative—a supplement that contained further fictional dialogues among members of Bougainville’s crew and Tahitians. The complicated structural and rhetorical features of the *Supplément* also allow Diderot to write in many voices and to offer a kind of running commentary throughout about relations between Europeans and non-Europeans, some of which ironizes the very myths that his fellow Europeans like Bougainville had constructed about Tahiti.<sup>49</sup>

In the second section of the *Supplément*, in which an elderly Tahitian scathingly bids farewell to Bougainville and his sailors, Diderot affirms the shared humanity of Tahitians and the French and deplors the domineering behaviour of French travellers. Paraphrasing earlier comments from Diderot’s review of Bougainville’s *Voyage*, the old Tahitian argues, “This inhabitant of Tahiti, whom you wish to ensnare like an animal, is your brother. You are both children of Nature. What right do you have over him that he does not have over you?” (42) Fearing that future contact with the French will be violent and ultimately enslaving, the old man recalls angrily how justly his fellow Tahitians treated Bougainville’s crew: “You came; did we attack you? Have we plundered your ship? Did we seize you and expose you to the arrows of our enemies? Did we harness you to work with our animals in the fields? We respected our image in you.” (42–43) By presenting Tahitians and the French as kindred souls, or “children of Nature”, Diderot emphasizes their shared humanity and, thus, grounds their comparison and moral equality; yet, it is ultimately their differences, in his view, that are most telling, for an encounter with a foreign society can serve to dislodge the prejudices of one’s country, the kinds of prejudice that must be checked both to learn from other peoples and to formulate a tenable conception of human diversity. Hence, he explains, through character “B” in the *Supplément*, how one’s understandable partiality toward what is familiar can be shed by reading New World travel accounts, such as Bougainville’s *Voyage*:

The account of Bougainville’s voyage is the only one which has ever drawn me to any country other than my own. Until I read it, I imagined that nowhere could one be as happy as at home, and I assumed that everyone on earth felt the same: a natural consequence of the attraction of the soil, itself bound up with the comforts it affords and which one doubts finding elsewhere. (40)

For Diderot, the underlying humanity of two societies serves to make their comparative study cognitively possible, while their differences help to curb the biases that are inevitably rooted in one’s own national character. Throughout most of the *Supplément*, however, Diderot would go beyond such well-meaning platitudes to transform the philosophical rela-

tionship between humanity and cultural difference in the course of re-describing Bougainville's Tahitians.

In an early work, *Suite de l'Apologie de l'abbé de Prades* (1752), Diderot speculated briefly about humans' primordial existence. Such early humans, he conjectured, possessed an extremely limited cognitive capacity, were ruled by instinct, and lived in herds, rather than in consciously maintained societies.<sup>50</sup> As he wrote later in the *Observations sur le Nakaz* (a commentary on Catherine II's proposed social and political reforms for Russia), "Men gathered together in society by instinct, just as weak animals form herds. There was certainly no kind of primitive agreement." (124) Despite such speculations, Diderot generally viewed the idea of a "pure" state of nature, a condition entirely free of human arts, inventions, and institutions, as a fruitless category for political thought. Human life, for Diderot, is too closely bound up with a shared social existence and with ingenuity and skill to justify theorizing at length about asocial beginnings and animalistic primordial conditions. As he notes in the *Supplément*, "the bleak and savage state of man . . . is so difficult to imagine and perhaps exists nowhere" (69). As we shall see, Diderot's ambivalence about the category of a primordial condition and its consequent insignificance for his political thought are crucial both for his understanding of New World peoples and for the development of his anti-imperialism.

Diderot indicates several features of Tahitian life throughout the *Supplément* that throw doubt on an idealized conceptualization of the New World. Far from portraying Tahiti as an idyll free of all social or political problems, Diderot denotes features of Tahitian society that expose both the inevitable injustices of social life and the fundamental vices of human character. Although he chose to omit certain aspects of Tahitian society about which Bougainville speculated in his *Voyage* (such as human sacrifice), Diderot nevertheless follows Bougainville's account in describing Tahiti as armed for conflict with neighbouring "enemies", as prey to nearby "oppressors" to whom Tahiti must pay tributes of their own men, and as victims of environmental disasters and public health tragedies, including "calamitous epidemics" (45, 64). Diderot in effect discredits many of the classic assertions about the peaceful and healthful character of New World peoples that the noble savage doctrine propagated. Although he tends to praise Tahiti and Tahitians' character in the *Supplément*, in part to indicate that a set of non-European social institutions and practices are capable of being well-ordered and just, Diderot's writings on human nature evince his scepticism toward entirely laudatory or pejorative descriptions of the human condition. In the *Encyclopédie* article "Hobbism", for instance, after contending that both Rousseau's and Hobbes's conflicting theories of human nature are equally astute but

one-sided, Diderot asserts that both “goodness and wickedness” are permanent elements of the human condition (28). It should come as no surprise, then, that Diderot does not characterize New World peoples as naturally good. As we shall see, Diderot argues that most of humans’ potentially darker energies can be channelled into productive, nondestructive outlets if social institutions and mores are constructed and maintained such that human selfishness and the common good are not entirely at odds. Diderot’s Tahiti, of course, is meant to be a concrete example—and thus a potent symbol—of such a society.

### **Diderot’s Tahiti: Appropriating and Subverting Noble Savage Theory**

I have argued that Rousseau’s writings on New World peoples fall prey to the paradoxes of noble savage accounts. As we have seen, noble savage theorists, such as Lahontan, left unresolved a tension between describing Amerindians as, on the one hand, hard-wired, instinct-driven creatures and, on the other, as partly autonomous, cognitive creatures who both understand natural laws and consciously put them into practice. Rousseau’s use of New World travel literature in the *Discourse on Inequality* reveals that he too moves back and forth between a purely natural, primordial, and indeed an animalistic account of New World individuals and an understanding of them as primitive, but recognizably human peoples in a praiseworthy middle stage of historical development. Diderot, on the other hand, disputes the view that Tahitians, or any other set of humans, could possibly live by the light of nature alone, whether understood as natural instincts or natural laws. Although noble savage theorists celebrate New World peoples, Diderot, by adopting the critical possibilities of the New World travel literature, yet subverting the basic idea of a noble savage, continues the tradition of cross-cultural social criticism while also preparing the way for an anti-imperialist political theory that would go well beyond the ultimately inconsistent and, at times, dehumanizing praise of New World peoples that the noble savage tradition offered.

Let us turn, then, to the details of Diderot’s account of Tahiti in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*. I examine four key features of his interpretation of Tahitian society that demonstrate his subversion of noble savagery and that evoke broader themes in his political and moral thought: the constraints and opportunities afforded by climate; social welfare as the purpose of social organization; the knowledge and practical skills that are needed to sustain social life; and, finally, the relationship between self-interest and social (or ‘general’) goods.

*Constraints and opportunities afforded by climate.* Diderot incorporates the diverse influences of a variety of environmental factors on human behaviour and institutions in his presentation of Tahitian society. In a response to Catherine the Great's assertion that only the "savages" of the New World are dominated by their climate, Diderot argues forcefully in the *Observations sur le Nakaz* that all humans are affected profoundly by their particular environments:

I find it very difficult to believe that climate does not have a great influence on national character; that the American overcome by heat can have the same character as the inhabitant of the North hardened by cold; that a people who live in the midst of frozen wastes can enjoy the same cheerfulness as a people who can stroll in a garden almost the whole year round. . . . This permanent cause will produce its effect on everything, not excluding the productions of the arts, laws, food, taste, amusements, etc. (100)

Nonetheless, in the same work, he argues that the form of government and its specific legislation can trump the influence of climate and other external forces that partly mould humanity into its diverse cultural forms. Accordingly, he declares,

Manners [*moeurs*] are everywhere the result of legislation and government; they are not African or Asiatic or European. They are good or bad. You are a slave under the Pole where it is very cold, and a slave in Constantinople where it is very hot; but everywhere a people should be educated, free and virtuous. (85)

Political practices, then, traditionally conceived as comprising simply legislation and government, provide a partly nonenvironmentally determined, autonomous control over the affairs of our lives. Diderot often combines an emphasis on the human agency inherent in planning and maintaining social institutions with the determinative powers of a variety of structural or environmental factors. Accordingly, he employs climate in his analysis of Tahitian society, but interestingly reverses the prevalent assumption about its effects. Tahiti's warm climate gives rise to a lavish agricultural bounty, he notes, thus affording its inhabitants a healthy amount of leisure. The constant battle of feeding and providing for a polity, the daily struggle to afford basic sustenance, is reduced considerably because of Tahitians' immediate environment. According to Diderot, a tropical climate itself, then, far from being an impediment as Montesquieu had argued, may fortuitously help to generate and to sustain an ethically fulfilling and meaningful life for Tahitians (66). Concerning New World inhabitants' alleged cruelty, Diderot speculates that European travel writings may be mistaken in their accounts. Invoking the primacy of survival over all other considerations, Diderot argues that humans probably become cruel only when their preservation is threatened,



and that such behaviour may be more common in the New World than in the Old because of geographical reasons: due to their proximity to entirely nondomesticated surroundings, he surmises, there must be a frequent need “to defend themselves against wild beasts”. On the whole, however, he concludes that the New World inhabitant is “gentle whenever his peace and security are left undisturbed.” (39)

Notwithstanding the structural factors in Diderot’s thought, the voluntarist features of social life are most crucial for his understanding of society; thus, as we shall see, the most detailed component of his treatment of Tahitian society concerns the social planning required to achieve prosperity and happiness. For Diderot, in contrast to Rousseau, it is not the stage in human development that New World inhabitants occupy that explains whatever happiness they enjoy, but rather their ingenuity, the conscious use of their will to transform their fortuitous circumstances into a felicitous social condition. Unlike Rousseau, who attributes the peacefulness of New World peoples to their precivilized existence, Diderot argues that a combination of immediate geographical and climatic causes with long-term, thoughtful social planning enhances both individual and collective welfare in Tahiti.

*Social welfare as the purpose of social organization.* Bougainville and his crew were so overcome by the lush beauty of Tahiti, the warm reception they were given, and the liberality of the Tahitians, in particular their sexual freedom, that they recalled the fabled Greek island Cythera.<sup>51</sup> Describing Tahiti with the aid of a familiar mythological referent helped Bougainville confront the radically distinct lifestyle that was led on these South Pacific islands. It also indicates the aspect of Tahiti that was most immediately striking, and that indeed is explored at such great length in Diderot’s *Supplément*—the seemingly rampant libidinal pleasures of an exotic locale, evocative not of any real place, but only of the mythical birthplace of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. Tahiti, then, was the New Cythera, *la Nouvelle-Cythère*. Diderot himself might appear to write the *Supplément* as if to convince his readers that Tahiti is such a mythic, island paradise, embodying the instinctual natural virtues of a primordial human life. He writes, for instance, that Tahitians faithfully adhere to the laws of Nature, instead of obeying false and arbitrary rules and institutions.

Diderot, however, slowly reveals the significant social planning that he hypothesizes might underlie the behaviour that Bougainville observed in 1768. The reader of the *Supplément* learns in greater detail throughout the dialogue how Diderot believes the Tahitians have *consciously* created and sustained a relatively efficient and just polity. The free and easy sexuality that is first described in a dialogue between the French chaplain of Bougainville’s crew and a Tahitian native, Orou, in the third section of

the *Supplément* is later exposed as a highly structured and socialized set of activities implemented in order to meet the goal of a steadily growing population. Diderot's interpretation of Tahitian life is generally congruent with Bougainville's two chapters on Tahiti in his *Voyage autour du monde*, but it adds much more detail about the mechanics of Tahitian social institutions in an attempt to unearth the sociology beneath Bougainville's surface impressions. On the whole, then, while Diderot's analysis is clearly inspired by Bougainville's first-hand account of Tahitian life, his conception of Tahiti is also an imaginative reconstruction of Tahitian society. Diderot himself understood perfectly well the partly constructed quality of the *Supplément* and of Bougainville's original account. In one of many ironic asides, character "A" notes dryly that the Old Tahitian's speech, written of course by Diderot though presented within the dialogue as part of a recently discovered supplement to Bougainville's *Voyage*, strikes him as oddly European in tone: "[t]he speech seems fierce to me, but in spite of what I find abrupt and primitive, I detect ideas and turns of phrase which appear European." (46) And earlier "A" asks his interlocutor suspiciously, "Are you falling prey to the myth of Tahiti?" (41) Concerning New World ethnography, "A" remarks that travellers are bound to present exaggerated descriptions of New World peoples:

Since we're all born with a taste for the exotic, magnifying everything around us, how could a man settle for the correct dimension of things, when obliged, as it were, to justify the journey he's made and the trouble he's taken to travel so far to see them? (39)

Diderot makes clear, then, his own awareness of the partiality both of his account of Tahiti and of Bougainville's *Voyage*. Given the brief description of Tahiti in the *Voyage*, Diderot seeks to envision the broad range of moral values and institutional structures that might have engendered the social practices and beliefs of Bougainville's Tahiti.

In Diderot's account, Tahiti sustains legal, economic, and social institutions to effect the ultimate goal of enlarging the population. Uniform social practices and public sexual morality are maintained by domestic education. Parents clothe young boys in a tunic and girls with a white veil. After puberty, elaborate public ceremonies emancipate the young from rules strictly prohibiting sexual encounters and confer upon them their status as fully responsible members of Tahitian society (54–55). Both physical and intellectual maturity are needed, argues Orou, for men and women to participate orderly and responsibly in the Tahitian social system. That the entire system is oriented with a view to generating and raising children is clear from the prohibitions of sex between men and women who cannot conceive children. Genetically infertile and elderly women wear black veils and women "indisposed by their monthly pe-

riods” wear grey veils (60). Both veiled women and the men who consort with them are punished by public censure. Legal sanctions, which include exile to the north of the island, keep the young apart from one another (62). In order to ensure that raising children would not create an undue economic burden, Diderot describes a Tahitian scheme of distributive justice in which one-sixth of every harvest is donated to the community as a whole. This communal food supply is then distributed according to the number of children in each family. Diderot argues that by enacting and maintaining such a policy, Tahiti fosters an economic system that provides tangible, material incentives for producing and nurturing children. Far from being based upon a set of institutions followed blindly due to custom or upon a subservience to natural instincts, Diderot’s Tahitians consciously mould the young in deliberate ways, maintain social and legal sanctions, and run an economic program of distribution in order to encourage specific forms of social behaviour.<sup>52</sup> For Diderot, a carefully crafted social and political process—and at times a rather severe one at that, far from a stereotypically licentious and carefree “natural” life free from the pressures of “civilization”—is crucial for sustaining a social life that is congruent with humans’ most elemental behavioural traits and desires, such as our sexual drives. It is this last aspect of Tahitian society that leads Diderot to note on occasion that Tahitians lead a more natural life than Europeans. The entirety of his account of Tahitian society makes clear that, in his view, Tahitians live ‘by nature’ only in the sense that they have created and maintained social institutions and norms that do not conflict severely with basic human desires. For Diderot, the paradigmatic example of a hegemonic and ‘unnatural’ set of norms, practices, and institutions, and thus one of the central rhetorical targets of the *Supplément* is the Catholic church in France.

Diderot argues that by attending to “the value of every newborn child, and the importance of population”, Tahiti strives to ensure that its land will contain as many people as it can sustain (63). As he notes, in assessing the welfare of France and Tahiti or indeed that of any country, one should attend to its wealth in human resources; in comparing the social practices of any two groups or specific polities, Diderot’s Tahitian character Orou attempts to convince the French chaplain that if a land can feed more people than it has, its mores are probably deficient and, by implication, it ought to be reordered toward the goal of a steadily rising population. (47–48) In characterizing population growth as one of the ultimate ends of social organization, Diderot was not alone. Despite a few opponents to this view who presaged what is now a widespread response to rapid population growth and its social effects (most notably Thomas Malthus, who published his *Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798), a staple feature of a broad range of eighteenth-century political thought

was its insistence on population as the standard of a nation's economic, social, and political health.<sup>53</sup> Demographic estimates served as indicators of the prosperity, as well as the political stability, of a country. In this view, a nation free of wars, internal persecution, famine, and plagues while booming in trade and industry would lead to a steady growth in population.<sup>54</sup> Politically, this focus on population ultimately reveals the centrality of social welfare for many *philosophes*. The exploits of leaders and the wealth of the aristocracy or church establishment are incidental in determining a nation's political achievement; instead, freedom from persecution, healthful living conditions, access to shelter and basic sustenance, and other features of basic human welfare constitute the true measure of a nation's success. In the context of the eighteenth-century French discourse on social welfare and political health, therefore, Diderot's argument in the *Supplément* about Tahiti's demography, as peculiar as this might seem to a contemporary reader, constitutes among the strongest possible *political* praise that one could give to a society. By sketching the social practices and institutions that might have achieved the seeming lack of poverty that Bougainville noted, Diderot suggests that Tahitians have organized themselves toward enhancing their collective welfare. If Tahiti is a paradise, he implies, it is in large part a paradise constructed and maintained by Tahitians themselves.

*Knowledge and skills for social life.* Diderot's arguments in the *Supplément* about the role that "advanced" knowledge ought to play in improving society at first appear to conflict with his broader social and political thought. On the one hand, Diderot celebrates Tahitian society because of what he perceives to be Tahitians' successful social planning and cultural values. It is hardly astonishing that the primary editor of the *Encyclopédie* would favour an interpretation of Tahitian society that emphasizes its rationally ordered structures, practices, and goals. At the same time, however, Diderot notes explicitly in the *Supplément* that an analysis of Tahiti demonstrates that a nation can progress without many of the "higher" sciences, such as physics or anatomy, which the *philosophes* lauded and investigated in detail in the volumes of the *Encyclopédie* (56). That the leader of a project premised on the view that cataloguing and disseminating the most advanced knowledge can benefit humanity at large is also able to champion, in the *Supplément*, a "primitive" society seems at first a contradiction.<sup>55</sup> Rousseau's thought, in contrast, offers a consistently critical view of the role that the arts, sciences, and technology have played in enslaving and tormenting Europeans and other 'civilized' peoples. His celebration of the New World in the *Discourse on Inequality* accords, therefore, with his earlier arguments in the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*.

Coming to terms with this potential paradox in Diderot's thought reveals his balanced view of the role of advanced knowledge in social development. For Diderot, such knowledge is neither the panacea nor the curse of the modern age. Thus, he refrains from using Europe's level of technological and social complexity as a benchmark against which to assess the cognitive capacity or social organization of New World societies. He rejects the view, in short, that the spread of European sciences and technology, or, in general, of European 'enlightenment', will necessarily improve the condition of non-European peoples. Moreover, unlike Rousseau, Diderot did not view sophisticated technology or other advancements in human knowledge as necessarily degrading. Advanced knowledge neither necessarily corrupts nor necessarily liberates—instead, political and social institutions, behaviour, and practices are the crucial elements needed for a healthy polity. Advances in knowledge are useful only if their social costs and benefits are carefully weighed and ultimately integrated into an efficient and just political system. For Diderot, Tahiti is worthy of respect, therefore, *not* because it lacks sophisticated technology and science (thus, Rousseau would argue, avoiding the slavish interdependence that accompanies such human knowledge), but because it has indigenously developed a set of institutions and a national character that are durable, efficient, and just—*this* is the proper work of politics, in his view, regardless of a people's philosophical, scientific, or technological development. In the *Histoire des deux Indes*, Diderot contends that “[a]ll civilized people were once primitive; and all primitive people, left to their natural impulse, were destined to become civilized.” (206) Human societies, he asserts, tend to become further differentiated and are characterized by increasingly complicated sets of institutions over time, yet such changes are not necessarily degrading. As we have seen, Diderot shares many of Rousseau's concerns about the social and political conditions of European nations, but Diderot ultimately does not praise Tahiti because it lies in a fixed stage of human history before civilization emerges. Rather, he views Tahitians as a people necessarily in flux; their measured growth, not their lack of development, becomes the key subject of his praise in the *Supplément*. The Tahitians, he argues, “remain unperturbed by too rapid an advance of knowledge.” (66) Thus, Diderot argues that the progress of human knowledge should be kept at a level at which humans can reflect upon the social consequences of proposed scientific and technological advances. Diderot bemoans the fact that Tahiti will become Europeanized through the coercion of imperialism in part because of his fear that Tahiti will fail as badly as Europe in accommodating advanced knowledge within a robust social and political order. The failure is not inevitable but probable, given that Tahitians themselves will never have the opportunity to develop their institutions freely and methodically to

incorporate such knowledge, as they have successfully done in the past—instead, they will be forced to plunge headlong into the labyrinth of the ‘civilized’ world under masters not of their own choosing.

*Relationship between self-interest and social goods.* Tahitian society, as presented in the *Supplément*, is in part grounded on the principle that personal, even selfish, interests need to be satisfied in order for political stability to take root and for justice to flourish. In Diderot’s political thought, the assumption that human beings care primarily for themselves or their immediate friends and family, even in Tahiti, runs alongside his frequent claim that the general good must always be preferred to the particular. Thus, for Diderot, one of the primary goals of politics, properly understood, is to configure society such that the conflict between narrow interests and the general welfare is minimized, for “[y]ou can be sure that whenever a man is as attentive to his fellow-creatures as to his bed, health or peace of mind, his hut, harvests or fields, he will do his utmost to ensure their welfare.”<sup>56</sup> (63)

In common with many other *philosophes*, Diderot held the view that individuals are fundamentally oriented toward their own existence and advantage and that this fact must be taken as a given in any descriptive or prescriptive account of society, politics, and ethics.<sup>57</sup> In Diderot’s thought, both institutions and moral values play crucial roles in reconciling personal with social interests. Tahiti is a laudable society, in his opinion, not because Tahitians have transformed themselves into altruistic agents, but because their shared traditions and social institutions appear to channel self-absorbed individual energies into productive behaviour and attitudes that benefit the community at large. Diderot’s emphasis on uniting the general and individual welfare is a crucial component of his political thought that finds a rhetorically powerful home in the *Supplément*. While Rousseau’s Amerindians live in durable societies because of their good fortune in inhabiting a particular stage of anthropological development, Diderot’s Tahitians maintain an impressive society over time by consciously ensuring that it is based on “self-interest”, the sentiment that Diderot considers, throughout his political writings, to be altogether the most “energetic and durable” (61).

## The New World as a Device of Social Criticism: The Overlapping and Rival Approaches of Diderot and Rousseau

Inspired in part by the noble savage themes in writings by Montaigne, Lahontan, and others (such as Fénelon), Diderot and Rousseau engage

in a thoroughgoing criticism of European societies by pointing to the technologically and institutionally simpler and, in their view, less corrupted New World. In addition to works on noble savagery, many other popular writings used the trope of judging Europe from a non-European viewpoint. Perhaps most notably, Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (published anonymously in 1721) offered what became a highly influential critical examination of French society from an ostensibly Muslim and Persian perspective. In general, the increasing stock of travel literature in the eighteenth century provided the grist for ever more radical analyses of European life, for more varied and insistent evaluations of European societies from an ethical perspective engendered in part by understandings of non-European peoples.<sup>58</sup> For Rousseau's and Diderot's philosophical anthropologies, this comparative dimension is most conspicuous in their treatments of human needs and property relations and the sentiment of love and the role of women in society. Although a number of Diderot's and Rousseau's criticisms of European societies are similar in spirit, upon closer examination, this aspect of their philosophical anthropologies also reveals the profound differences that exist between their theorizations of New World peoples. To be sure, both Diderot and Rousseau use the ethnographic literature about non-European peoples as a critical foil against which the injustices of European societies can be brought into view. Nonetheless, the manner in which they understand non-European peoples, even in those philosophical contexts in which they instrumentally serve a critical function that has more to do with Europe than with the non-European world, has an impact upon how robustly non-European peoples can be viewed as moral equals. The nature of Rousseau's criticism of European life often draws upon a highly exotic and naturalistic understanding of New World peoples, the pernicious (if inadvertent) consequences of which will be examined in the next section. Diderot, in contrast, offers a social commentary upon European societies that simultaneously humanizes non-European peoples and that therefore accords well with his deep concern about their subjected status, as we will see in the following chapter.

*Human needs and property relations.* Rousseau argues that the true needs of humans are as simple as basic sustenance and rest: food, drink, and sleep are enough to satisfy the savage human (135; cf. 143). The most basic physical needs, then, are natural to humanity; all other desires are socially constructed and often harmful. In arguing against Hobbes's contention that the state of nature is prone to violence, Rousseau asserts that Hobbes's chief error was to attribute to humanity the need "to satisfy a multitude of passions that are the product of Society and have made Laws necessary" (153). Recalling earlier noble savage writings,

Rousseau links the development of socially engendered passions not only to a corrupt set of social practices, but also to poor physical health itself. In this view, a natural human is a “free being whose heart is at peace and body in health” (152). The creation and stirrings of human passions lead to unstable and unjust societies as well as enervated, sick bodies. Rousseau, therefore, identifies old age as practically the only real cause of death among New World peoples. He argues that civilized societies engender such strong passions and superfluous needs that the public health itself is in danger. Rousseau praises the strong constitutions and physical vigour of New World peoples and contrasts the maladies brought on by the luxurious idleness and dangerously rich foods of the civilized rich as well as the harsh labour and meagre sustenance that is afforded occasionally, if at all, to the poor in civilized nations (138, 203–4). According to Rousseau, in order to acquire basic necessities, natural humans learned “to overcome the obstacles of Nature” (165). In time, the establishment of a relatively sedentary lifestyle created the leisure with which the first “conveniences” were acquired; this, he writes, was the “first source of evils” in human history (168). Both the body and mind were enervated, and new, unfamiliar, and ultimately illusory needs soon became perceived as basic necessities. Perversely, with the softened characters of newly sedentary peoples, the pain of even contemplating the loss of these new commodities grew stronger than the joy of having them. As a result of the psychological changes wrought by a growing materialism—especially an increasing vanity (*amour propre*), a tendency to judge oneself according to the gaze of others—wealth eventually became the standard of comparison among individuals and groups (188–89). Luxury, the crowning height of materialistic depravity, results finally in depopulation. Farmers, squeezed by taxes and unable to manage a subsistence wage, flee to the cities, leaving barren fields, only to become destitute and to join the growing ranks of the wretched urban poor—“[t]hat is how the State, while it on one side grows rich, grows weak and is depopulated on the other” (206).

In a similar vein, Diderot castigates many civilized desires as “superfluous” and “factitious” (43). Thus, a deep suspicion of ever increasing commodities, other material trappings, and the attendant flourishing of selfish and degenerate passions in modern Europe runs throughout both Rousseau’s and Diderot’s writings. The most primitivist side of Rousseau’s interpretation of the New World, however, posits a simpler, arguably *natural*, and presocial life as a benchmark against which the material excesses and passionate willfulness of civilized nations can be measured. In contrast, Diderot lauds Tahitians’ *artful* (that is, cultural) efforts at maintaining a community that appropriates its surrounding environment prudently, for the benefit of enhancing human welfare rather than for the



sake of material production itself. Diderot, of course, often describes Tahitians as engaged in a “natural” life, but, as we have seen, he clearly means by this that they have planned and sustained social relations in a manner congruent with what he considers to be elemental (or natural) needs and desires. He celebrates the importance that Tahitians have accorded to leisure in contrast to the torment of excessive toil or wanton luxury in France. Tahitians themselves, in this view, have determined what balance between work and leisure is most conducive to a healthy lifestyle and polity. For Diderot, the narrative of development from a primitive to a civilized society is thoroughly social from beginning to end—it does not presume that human problems arise with social activity, for he takes social life to be constitutive of the human condition. The character of social practices and institutions, not the very existence of sociability, is the crucial issue for Diderot’s analysis of both European and non-European peoples. The psychological changes and technological momentum created by early efforts to make humans’ environments habitable eventually foster social conditions that generate inflated needs and conflicting, unstable passions. As Diderot contends, these forces of historical change drive “[man] well beyond his immediate objective; so that when his need has elapsed he comes to be swept into the great ocean of fantasy from which he cannot pull out.” (66) Thus, humans’ efforts to survive in harsh surroundings foster a set of needs, desires, and passions that compel them disastrously to attempt to master Nature itself. Diderot argues that Europeans have impoverished their souls and societies by adopting such a domineering attitude toward their environment. Accordingly, he argues in his *Observations sur le Nakaz* that

it was the necessity of struggling against the ever-present, common enemy—nature—which brought men together. They became aware that they struggled to better effect together, than separately. The evil is that they went past their goal. They were not content to conquer, they wanted to triumph; they were not content to bring down the enemy, they wanted to trample him underfoot. (123–24)

For Diderot, the natural environment is an “enemy” only to the extent that it raises impediments against human survival and flourishing. His central concern is not that Europeans have cultivated and appropriated their surroundings, since all humans out of necessity do this, but that they have done so precipitously.

Rousseau’s and Diderot’s concerns about private property also highlight their different understandings of New World peoples. Diderot had read in Bougainville’s account that individual homes and the ownership of basic goods exist in Tahiti, but, in Diderot’s view, Tahitians’ shared values and communal institutions counteract whatever egoistic psycho-

logical changes and social inequalities arise as a result of a system of private property. For Rousseau, however, the opposite fact protects the New World from rampant corruption and injustice: it is the lack of interdependence, not the communal linkages among individuals, that ensures a “free, healthy, good, and happy” life, despite the existence of some private property (171). For Rousseau, then, Amerindians escape the ills of Europe’s property relations for reasons largely outside of their control, while in contrast, for Diderot, a combination of environmental factors and humanly chosen and sustained social activities and institutions explain Tahitians’ greater liberty and equality.

*The sentiment of love and the role of women in society.* Another criticism of European society through the comparative lens afforded by the New World concerns the status and the role of women. Diderot and Rousseau both contrast relationships between men and women and their social effects in the New World with those in European societies. Judging the latter in light of the purported superiority of the former is, however, one of the few similarities on this issue between them. Their writings reveal radically divergent positions on the status of women and about how encounters with particular New World peoples’ moral values could inform European notions about sexual relations.

The *Supplément* is as much a work on sexual politics as on politics conventionally understood. Returning to the concept of property and its connection to the New World, Diderot berates Old World societies for treating women as either the de jure or de facto property of men. This “tyranny”, Diderot argues, is one of several ways in which human sexuality is twisted into an almost criminal act in contemporary European societies. One of the central claims of the *Supplément* is that Tahiti is in part founded upon, and thus not inconsistent with, humans’ elemental desires and needs. Thus, Diderot portrays Tahiti as a society at ease with the personal and social dynamics of human sexuality. In Tahiti, Diderot asserts, women are not confused with property and, thus, intimate relationships are more liberated and relaxed. The empirical evidence furnished by Bougainville about Tahiti, then, demonstrates for Diderot that a healthy, well-functioning community can exist with sexual mores significantly different from what the Catholic church, European states and their censors, and prevalent European social customs dictate are necessary to preserve a basic moral order. Diderot argues that in treating women as propertied objects, European societies have

confused something which cannot feel or think or desire or will . . . with a very different thing that cannot be exchanged or acquired; which *does* have freedom, will, desire; which has the ability to give itself up or hold itself back forever;

which complains and suffers; and which can never be an article of exchange unless its character is forgotten and violence is done to its nature. (50)

The confused belief that reduces women to mere property, then, in addition to laying the groundwork for monogamy, rules of chastity, and other social practices that, in his view, violate humans' sexual passions, ultimately constricts liberty, thereby violating human dignity.

The subtitle of Diderot's *Supplément* foreshadows his position on the sources of European virtues and vices: "dialogue between A and B on the inappropriateness of attaching moral ideas to certain physical actions that do not accord with them". For Diderot, a whole host of purported vices and virtues are social constructs that are born of the mistaken impulse to restrict instinctive human desires that are often amoral. In the *Supplément*, a litany of such qualities of character are analyzed from the perspective of Tahitian social behaviour and mores. Diderot argues, for instance, that jealousy is exacerbated in civilized societies because of "false moral standards and the extension of property" to an entire class of human beings (68). He asserts that the most socially harmful consequences of jealousy and other personal vices are minimized in Tahiti because of the more liberal approach that it has chosen to adopt with regard to sexuality. In the old Tahitian's speech, Diderot contends that just as Christianity helped to breed shame and fear about sexual relations in Europe, it now unravels the healthy sexual attitudes of Tahiti through its missionary work (44).<sup>59</sup>

Diderot takes to task not only religious institutions, but also the secular legal code (in particular civil laws concerning marriage) and social customs that are bound up with the formalities and proprieties of aristocratic society (70–71). Thus, in the *Supplément*, Diderot relates a popular eighteenth-century story about a New England prostitute, Polly Baker, who is charged with becoming pregnant as a result of dissolute morals; the narrative takes the form of a speech purportedly given by Polly Baker at her trial in Connecticut.<sup>60</sup> Laws and social prejudices, she argues, change the nature of innocent, harmless actions into criminal offences. Instead, actions that truly "disturb public tranquillity" should be rightfully considered unjust criminal behaviour. And so, she adds, laws should be enacted that punish irresponsible *men*, the bachelors who impregnate, deceive, and neglect women and who even drive many of them to prostitution, not the responsible mothers who raise their children despite the social calumnies heaped upon them. Diderot notes the irony that although it is widely acknowledged that the nation as a whole benefits materially from the birth of children, single mothers like Polly Baker nevertheless become impoverished (57, 70–71). The social engineering that subverts the nature of actions and deems them to be sinful, criminal, or

improper, Diderot implies, is a manifestation of the exploitative and unjust values that guide European societies. To be sure, Diderot's presentation of Tahitian life also exhibits its share of socialized communal values. But he insists that in Tahiti such habituated practices and social norms engender individual contentment and the broader social welfare much more effectively than in any European society because of an approach that seeks to make social institutions and their values compatible with the most basic human needs and desires. Just as Tahitian society arguably structures itself in accordance with, not against, self-interest, it also provides socially productive and nondestructive outlets for humans' sexuality and other fundamental drives and passions.

Rousseau elaborates a distinction between physical and moral love that manifests the profound differences between his and Diderot's conceptions of women and their position in society. "Savages", Rousseau argues, take part in physical love, a sentiment born of the most general sexual desires. Their limited ability to think abstractly and their inability to make comparisons, to focus vainly on appearances, beauty, or merit, preclude them from engaging in moral love, a passion unique to the civilized world that focuses humans' raw physical desires to a specific, preferred object. And so the Caribs, who have "departed least from the state of Nature", are the least susceptible to jealousy and "the most peaceful in their loves" (158). "Now it is easy to see", Rousseau adds in contrast, "that the moral aspect of love is a factitious sentiment; born of social practice, and extolled with much skill and care by women in order to establish their rule and to make dominant the sex that should obey." (158)

The critical ends to which Rousseau and Diderot deploy New World women also differ greatly. While Diderot's contentions about sexuality, love, and women sometimes reflect the conventional views of his time, Rousseau more typically exhibits the norms of his age. Diderot rejects the treatment of women as property in European societies, in which, he notes, it is clearly men who wield not only the most social, but also sexual power.<sup>61</sup> In contrast, Rousseau asserts that women deploy moral love to subjugate men. Diderot emphasizes the equal dignity of the sexes in order to counter the objectification of women; Rousseau endorses the view that women are naturally inferior and, thus, properly constituted to obey men.<sup>62</sup> Although Diderot and Rousseau, then, portray sexual relations in European societies as inferior to those found in the New World, they employ distinct moral vocabularies to explain such differences, and thus differ widely in their analyses and conclusions. Rousseau deploys Amerindians as instinctually loving creatures who are not yet ruled by the artificial sexual dominance of women, while Diderot chastises European patriarchal attitudes by celebrating Tahitians' consciously formed and

maintained sexual morality, one that, he believes, comes closer to affirming women's humanity. Overall, the contrast with Diderot's account of sexuality in New World societies is striking, for Rousseau's naturalized Amerindians can do *nothing but* engage in physical love. Diderot's Tahitians, on the other hand, form and maintain moral values and social institutions that accord with humans' sexual passions.

The intellectual cross-cultural encounters that New World travel literature brought about in Europe from the late fifteenth century onward yield an ambiguous legacy. On the one hand, the rise of comparative social theory and a growing interest in foreign peoples for their own sake helped to create an awareness of the complexity of non-European societies.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, the theme of the exotic noble savage remained strong throughout the eighteenth century, as the writings of Lahontan and Rousseau make clear. Diderot, however, even when playing the New World against Europe for his own political purposes, acknowledges New World peoples as conscious, fully rational, and cultural beings. Also, as we have seen, Diderot satirizes his imaginative reconstruction of Tahitian life. Such ironic moments indicate Diderot's self-awareness about the idealized representation of Tahitian society that he employs in the course of his social criticism of European practices and institutions.<sup>64</sup> Most importantly, the substance of his characterization of 'primitive' life is almost always at odds with the mechanical and naturalistic conception of New World peoples that one finds most often in the tradition of noble savagery. Ultimately, Diderot's vigorous anti-imperialism makes clear his ethical interest in non-European peoples for their own sake, and distinguishes him from those who, however inadvertently, present a nearly animalistic characterization of New World peoples. Diderot developed his multifaceted and subversive perspective of New World peoples for the *Supplément* at about the same time as his anti-imperialist contributions to Abbé Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes*—indeed, some passages in the latter are simply borrowed from the former.<sup>65</sup> Before turning to an examination of how Diderot's philosophical anthropology and social theory shape his anti-imperialist political thought in the next chapter, I first conclude with some further observations about the ethical and political consequences of theorizing 'natural humanity'.

## The Dehumanization of Natural Humanity

Diderot deployed the noble savage strategy of thinkers such as Montaigne and Rousseau in criticizing Europe through the lens of the New World, but his characterization of New World peoples challenged the understanding of humanity and its relationship to culture offered by no-

ble savage thinkers. Moreover, he went far beyond most noble savage accounts in attending to the predicament of New World peoples themselves, especially in light of European imperialism. While only strains of this concern exist in Rousseau's thought, Diderot's writings resolutely attack the injustices committed against aboriginal peoples. Instead of focusing almost exclusively on the problems facing Europeans as the noble savage theorists did, Diderot details and decries the plight of New World peoples. Noble savage theorists occasionally criticized the corruption that Europeans could bring to 'natural' and 'innocent' peoples. The dehumanization brought about by these thinkers' exotic characterizations of Amerindians and others, however, undercut whatever possibilities existed in their thinking for cultivating a genuine cross-cultural sympathy with historically real, flesh-and-blood aboriginals who at worst were being systematically enslaved or massacred. The problems that motivated noble savage thinkers were almost always those of Europe—hence their need to place foreign peoples at the level of an idealized, 'natural' standard in order to decry European materialism, corruption, and injustice.

Rousseau and Diderot are among the eighteenth-century thinkers who developed a multidimensional social theory, one that approaches the study of societies by recognizing the complex interdependence of structural and voluntary features of human life.<sup>66</sup> The understanding of the human subject that such an account presupposes is that humans are *cultural agents*; that is, humans are partly shaped by and situated within cultural contexts, yet are also able to consciously and freely transform themselves and their surroundings. While Rousseau acknowledges this to be true for humans at particular stages of development, Diderot theorizes humans to be *constitutively* cultural agents. In their own ways, then, Rousseau and, under his influence, Diderot theorize the manifold and intricate relationships between our inherited institutions, practices, and beliefs and our ability to scrutinize and reconfigure them. Rousseau introduces the term "perfectibility" to philosophical discourse, arguing that this is one of the defining characteristics of humanity, while also formulating a subtle and profound analysis of the ways in which humans are psychologically moulded and constrained by technological and sociological factors not of their own choosing. Diderot, too, recognizes liberty to be a constitutively human trait, while also appreciating the costs and benefits of physiological, historical, and even geographic determinants. For Diderot and Rousseau, humans' partial autonomy is a universal feature of humanity in addition to being the ultimate source of particularity, of the multiplicity of human life. Their social analyses point to the interlocking web of voluntary and structural elements that comprise all societies. As we have seen, however, Rousseau tends to praise Amerindians and Hottentots for factors beyond their control—such as the inborn stirrings of

natural pity—while Diderot theorizes Tahitians as individuals who have consciously formed and maintained social institutions that are in accord with their collective goals and natural instincts. Overall, Diderot conceptualizes humans as such (and thus New World individuals) as cultural agents, in contrast to Rousseau. While Rousseau usually uses Amerindians to illustrate the concept of a universal human subject, the pure natural humans of his earliest state of nature, it is Diderot's thicker and more particularized understanding of Tahitians that paradoxically prepares the way for a universal, inclusive anti-imperialist political theory, one that embraces both Europeans and non-Europeans.

Diderot's application of a multidimensional social analysis toward societies such as Tahiti is linked to his moral respect for, and his impassioned anti-imperialist defence of, New World peoples. As we have seen, despite Rousseau's potential for an anthropologically acute understanding of Amerindians, it is Diderot who attempts to understand New World inhabitants as cultural beings. We saw earlier that the influential and archetypal noble savage theorist Lahontan had been able to favour colonial policies that were explicitly destructive of Amerindian societies while also lauding these societies' practices and beliefs because his appreciation of Amerindians was ultimately very thin. Lahontan's account of the Huron, for example, rested fundamentally upon a *decultured* description of their life; in spite of his stated belief in their humanity and his arguments that they possessed impressive cognitive powers, Lahontan effectively dehumanized Amerindians in light of his often naturalistic representations of them, which denied their status as cultural agents. I have argued that Rousseau's political thought also manifests this connection between deculturation and dehumanization. As the *Discourse on Inequality* demonstrates, Rousseau moves easily from discussing the "savages" of the original state of nature to the "savages" of contemporary New World societies. Given that the 'savage condition' amounts to what Rousseau himself considered to be a nearly animal existence, his use of the New World travel literature to theorize the earliest state of nature results in precisely the same curious result created by earlier noble savage accounts: those celebrated as the most purely human appear as inhuman, instinct-driven, and mechanical animals.

In addition to the disturbing ethical consequences of portraying New World peoples in this manner, many eighteenth-century political thinkers believed that the very concept of a 'natural human' was indefensible. Today, significant contemporary gains in our knowledge of humans' biological inheritance and its complex relationship to environmental factors—knowledge derived in part through developments in genetics and evolutionary biology—indicate the incoherence of even the hypothetical idea of a human being shorn of all cultural attributes. We now know that

humans, far more than other animals, are dependent upon extragenetic mechanisms—not merely environmental stimuli, but cultural signals that partly order and structure behaviour and expectations—because the genetic information humans inherit is far more diffuse than the narrower and more precisely ordered and effective genetic cues given to cognitively simpler animals. Cultural norms and expectations, in other words, provide humans with information without which they could not function. Evolutionary history in part explains our unique dependence upon cultural knowledge and may well demonstrate the centrality of culture to the human condition.<sup>67</sup> A variety of philosophers in the eighteenth century argued in a more speculative fashion that humans are unlike other animals in that they rely upon far more than their basic instincts and partly fashion the world themselves, thus living their lives according to the conventional worlds of their own making (and remaking). Those who defended the idea of human sociability as a constitutive element of humanity believed that humans not only *can* but *must* live according to more than their instincts, and the environmental stimuli that trigger them, in order to function coherently.

Natural humans, humans stripped of their cultural attributes, would thus be, as Clifford Geertz writes, “unworkable monstrosities with very few useful instincts, fewer recognizable sentiments, and no intellect: mental basket cases”, far from the placid and well-ordered natural humans described at length in the *Discourse on Inequality*.<sup>68</sup> Like many contemporary scholars, Geertz mistakenly identifies the reductive concept of a natural man with what he calls “the Enlightenment view of man”.<sup>69</sup> As I have argued (and will continue to argue with reference to the anti-imperialist political philosophies of Diderot, Kant, and Herder), there are important strands of eighteenth-century social and political thought that take humans to be intrinsically cultural agents who partly transform, and yet are always situated within, various contexts. Strikingly, anti-imperialist political theories in the Enlightenment era were almost always informed by such understandings of humanity.

Rousseau, then, followed the tradition of noble savagery in denying a crucial and indispensable feature of human nature: cultural agency, an element moreover that, at certain moments in the *Discourse on Inequality*, he appears to deny to a whole set of peoples—the indigenous inhabitants of the New World. To be sure, given Rousseau’s theorization of perfectibility, he too believes that humans, in many respects, make themselves. But in his conjectural history, Rousseau does not theorize human beings *from the outset*—that is, by their very nature—as social and cultural beings. As we have seen, this has profound consequences for his interpretation of New World peoples. Rousseau’s need to provide empirical examples for a supposedly hypothetical category transforms what



might have been merely a heuristic (if implausible) concept of natural humanity into an ethically troubling and inadvertently dehumanizing rhetoric, one that replicates the paradoxes of the noble savage tradition. Pace conventional understandings of Enlightenment philosophy, since the relationship of art, ingenuity, and freedom to human life was a lively topic of debate in the eighteenth century, a number of Rousseau's contemporaries attacked his concept of a natural human in precisely this manner. As Adam Ferguson argued, with reference to the New World and Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, and as part of his own conjectural history of humanity,

We speak of art as distinguished from nature; but art itself is natural to man. He is in some measure the artificer of his own frame, as well as his fortune, and is destined, from the first age of his being, to invent and contrive. . . . If we are asked therefore, Where the state of nature is to be found? we may answer, It is here; and it matters not whether we are understood to speak in the island of Great Britain, at the Cape of Good Hope, or the Straits of Magellan. While this active being is in the train of employing his talents, and of operating on the subjects around him, all situations are equally natural. . . . But if nature is only opposed to art, in what situation of the human race are the footsteps of art unknown? In the condition of the savage, as well as in that of the citizen, are many proofs of human invention. . . .<sup>70</sup>

As we have seen, Diderot theorizes along these lines that humans are intrinsically social and cultural beings and, accordingly, conceptualizes New World peoples as such. For the eighteenth-century thinkers who explicitly or tacitly challenged the tradition of noble savagery, a multi-dimensional social theory—one that attends to the complex interplay between our structural and voluntary characteristics (which Rousseau undertakes in his radical analysis of European societies)—was crucial for an understanding not only of 'civilized peoples', but a fortiori of *any* group of human beings. Since Diderot understood non-European peoples as *cultural* beings, he therefore afforded them more genuine respect as *human* beings, a regard borne out most comprehensively in his anti-imperialist contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes*.

An understanding of New World (and other non-European) peoples as social and cultural beings served as a key catalyst of the rise of anti-imperialist thought in the late eighteenth century. The exotic beings that classic noble savage accounts presented were too unreal (in part because they were presented as fully 'natural') to be considered as flesh-and-blood humans with whom one could sympathize and on behalf of whom one would challenge European imperialism. Diderot was powerfully influenced by the social and political criticism that Rousseau's device of natural humanity made possible, and he incorporated much of Rousseau's

account of perfectibility and freedom into his increasingly humanistic political thought. But Diderot also challenged the view that humans were at bottom asocial, and rejected the view that humanity could be best understood by attempting to reveal a core, natural human that underlies the various cultural layers of human life. For Diderot, human beings are fundamentally social and cultural beings, and he thus interpreted Tahitian society in the *Supplément* as a set of constructed social norms and institutions that are amenable to conscious human transformation, rather than portraying Tahitians as natural humans who live by the light of nature alone. The moral and political significance of this is crucial, as an examination of Diderot's anti-imperialist writings in the following chapter will show.