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## THE SAVAGE IN EUROPEAN SOCIAL THOUGHT: A PRELUDE TO THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE DIVERGENT PEOPLES AND CULTURES OF AUSTRALIA AND OCEANIA

### *Introduction*

The savage, either Noble or Ignoble, is a European mythical creation – a mytheme (Lemaire 1980:16). In European social thought mainly hunting and gathering societies (American Indians, Australian Aborigines) or horticulturalists (Pacific Islanders) have served as a model for the development of this mytheme. These societies have been pictured as precisely the opposite of European civilization. As such they have fulfilled a double function in European philosophy and ideology.

On the one hand the contrast with European civilization has been phrased in negative terms: no progress but stagnation; not civilized but cruel and primitive; no history but timelessness; not logical but pre-logical. In this respect the concepts 'Primitive' and 'Savage' were antipodes of the European situation and they formed a legitimation for the European process of civilization.

However, these societies have been objects not only of antipathy, and even distaste, but also of desire and nostalgia. Again hunting and gathering societies were pictured as the exact opposite of the European way of life, but this time with positive connotations: human beings in these societies were still living in a natural state, free from the oppressive bonds of civilization. These Children of Nature did not yet know what social and sexual restrictions were. They also lived in close harmony with their natural environment, which provided all their material and biological needs. All this has been lost in the process of civilization.

In both cases the ideas about the nature of primitive societies are mythical creations which serve as an antithesis for the notion of European civilization: the first-mentioned attitude as a justification for progress, development and even colonization; the second as a fundamental criticism of that selfsame process.

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In this article I shall first try to trace the mytheme of both the Noble and the Ignoble Savage in European social thought. Given the vast amount of literature available on this subject, this will only be done here very briefly and without too many nuances. After that I shall concern myself with the relation between the two contrasting concepts and also with the position of the writers who are adherents of either the Noble or the Ignoble Savage school.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Noble Savage*

Up to the eighteenth century the American Indians played the principal part in the mytheme of the Noble Savage. The first reports from the newly discovered continent gave a new impetus to the age-old idea of a Paradise Lost, a Golden Age in which people had lived happily in a natural state, free of the constraints of modern western society. Christopher Columbus painted a picture of the islands he set foot on as a kind of Arcadia. He clearly was impressed by the tranquillity of the air there and by the beauty of the landscape and its lush vegetation. In his reports a number of recurring themes are found: the nakedness of the people; their fine physique and their peaceful minds (with the exception of the Carib Indians, who were cannibals). Furthermore, they had no laws or institutions to regulate their daily life and behaviour because they did the right things naturally. Private ownership was also unknown to them.

Later on, Columbus' opinion became less favourable, but initially the desire to find a kind of lost Paradise shaped the content of his assessment and that of others. Columbus also reported that the Indians did not process iron, while Americo Vespucci, another early explorer, observed sexual promiscuity and old age - up to 150 years - among the Indians.

All the characteristics mentioned here are also to be found in classical Greek myths of the Golden Age. The discovery of iron is associated with decline, war and misery, whereas sexual promiscuity and old age are recurring motifs in the ancient descriptions of such a Golden Age. That many observations were made within the framework of these ideas is strikingly illustrated by Vespucci's information about the life-span of 150

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<sup>1</sup> A first draft of this paper was presented at the Fifth International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies held in Darwin (Australia) in August/September 1988. I wish to thank Dr. Kommers for the very valuable comments he made for this final draft. Dr. Kommers is currently engaged in detailed research on the descriptive basis of this subject, mainly by studying the vast number of authentic travel accounts. I also extend my thanks to Dr. Corbey for drawing my attention to literature which proved to be of great use.

years. How could he possibly know this when he spent only a couple of weeks with the Indians in Brazil?<sup>2</sup> It was his knowledge of the antique accounts of the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, who mentioned exactly the same age with respect to people of certain islands ('Blessed Islands') whom he called Heliopolitans, which influenced this (see Lemaire 1986:35).

The desire to find Paradise Lost did not date solely from Greek antiquity, but was also influenced by the Biblical tradition. Especially in the Renaissance we see a combination of this classical idea of a Golden Age with the Jewish-Christian Paradise myth. In this respect Columbus and Vespucci represent an early example of the way the New World is perceived through the mythologies of the Old World.

The concept of the New World is comparable with a concept like 'The Orient' of which Edward Said remarks that it must be understood as an 'ideological construct rather than as a geographic designation for the Near East or as a cultural reformulation of Islam' (quoted in Foster 1982:22-23). In this sense America - as an ideological construct - and its people were not only discovered but also (re-)invented. There are two elements of which the concept of the Noble Savage and the whole ideological fabric connected with it are composed: firstly, the assumption that there was a natural state which preceded European civilization and which was still to be found in the Americas, and secondly, a recurring set of characteristics with which the inhabitants of this continent were accredited. Although this combination of elements - often labelled 'Primitivism' - seems not to have had very much influence on social thought in mediaeval Europe, it had never disappeared completely.

In the Renaissance these classical ideas became important again with the discoveries of the Americas and the renewed interest in classical writers - an interest which arose practically simultaneously with the former. After the Spanish explorers and philosophers - among whom Las Casas was an influential figure -, mainly the French elaborated on the mytheme of the Noble Savage during the second half of the 16th century.

Prominent among them was Montaigne, who worked out the comparison between the Noble Savage and the Europeans further. The characteristics he ascribed to the former were basically similar to those applied by Columbus, Vespucci and others. The Savage was honest, sincere, and spontaneous. Furthermore, he was naked, lived as a hunter and gatherer

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to remember that until the eighteenth century it was not generally recognized that empirical observation was the essential basis for knowledge. The claim for autopsy which can be found again and again in old travel accounts does not imply that the authors equated autopsy and empirical observation as means of gaining empirical knowledge. Therefore observations of 'wonderful and strange things' did not encourage greater empirical precision. This is the reason why legends, myths and fictions exerted great influence on the acquisition of knowledge.

and was uncorrupted by science, commerce or the political institutions of modern civilization. Montaigne compared him to the wild fruits in the woods, which grow spontaneously, as opposed to those which are cultivated. The latter served as a metaphor for Europeans, who were seen as artificial products of civilization. They were full of lies, degenerated, and in need of all kinds of institutions in order to survive (see Lemaire 1986:91-103). Montaigne's philosophy inspired many scholars, who were all to idealize the society of the American Indians and to compare it with European civilization. Thus the construct of the Noble Savage became a powerful device for fundamental criticism of European society and the way it was developing.

In this conception, the inhabitants of America represented the natural state of mankind and eventually led to Locke's famous phrase that 'In the beginning all the World was America'. In a nutshell, this phrase expressed the idea that the first ancestors of the Europeans had lived in much the same way as the American hunters and gatherers were living in Locke's time.

This idea appealed to Rousseau, who worked it out in his own way, constructing a semi-fictional natural state based on what was known about American Indians, the Carib Indians in particular. Of all known human beings, they were still the closest to that supposed original natural state. They represented the youth of humanity more than any other people. Rousseau also singled out a set of features ascribed to the Indians and compared them with the situation among the inhabitants of Europe. Again the balance was clearly in favour of the Indians, who were free, independent, not alienated from their own self, and so on. In this respect Rousseau was following a well-established tradition, by then almost two centuries old, in which the discoveries of the Americas played a major part, as Lemaire states (1986:155), in the 'discourse' about one's own society, its purpose and its political and moral order. The Indians to whom the ideological construct of the Noble Savage referred were without exception hunters and gatherers (except for the members of the Indian civilizations of Peru and Mexico, which were left out of the picture).

Throughout the eighteenth century the notion of the Noble Savage remained a powerful concept in French social thinking, but was about to lose ground in England and Scotland. Conflicts with natives and reports about cruelties on their part detracted from their Noble image. The best idea some of the advocates of the Noble Savage could come up with was that contact with European civilization had drastically altered the innocent character of the Indians. Clearly, the mainstream of at least English and Scottish social thinking was becoming more and more occupied with the Ignoble part of the Savage.

However, the idealized reports from the newly discovered Pacific region made the Noble Savage popular again in England for a while, at least in some circles, and reinforced his position in France. From that time on, the

Hawaiians and Tahitians gradually replaced the American Indians as model for the mytheme of the Noble Savage. The manners and customs of some of the recently discovered people, as Meek points out (1976:216), stimulated the same kind of comparison with classical antiquity as the manners and customs of the American Indians had done before. In this tradition De Bougainville and Banks, for example, compared the Tahitians to the ancient Greeks and contrasted all their (supposed) virtues with the unnatural situation European civilization had given rise to. In 1773 Monbodo remarked that '... the manners of the Americans had been so altered during the long period of their communication and intercourse with the Old World that it was now to countries of the South Seas rather than to the Americas that we ought to look for examples of peoples living in the natural state' (quoted from Meek 1976).

In the Pacific the equation of the Noble Savage with hunters and gatherers was of course less obvious than in the Americas previously. However, in both cases the emphasis lay perhaps much more on the 'natural qualities' of the people in question than necessarily on a specific mode of subsistence. In other words, horticulturalists in the Pacific easily served the same purpose as hunters and gatherers in the Americas, as long as their living conditions and behaviour could be characterized as 'natural', 'innocent', 'happy', and so on.

Only in the English and Scottish Enlightenment did the explicit emphasis on modes of subsistence as a criterion become pre-eminently crucial (see Meek 1976). Then the so-called four-stage theory (see the next section) emerged, and this theory was based on the various modes of subsistence. In this theory hunters and gatherers represented the first and most primitive stage of the development of mankind. They appeared exclusively as Ignoble, and this qualification was intrinsically connected with a specific mode of subsistence, namely hunting and gathering.

The influence of the Pacific on European social thought has been described admirably by Professor Bernard Smith (1985) and need not be elaborated here. It will suffice to emphasize once more that, with respect to the Noble Savage, Europe projected the same emotional and ideological constructs on the Pacific peoples as it had done before on the Americans. The American Noble Savage was dead, long live his Pacific successor.

But, despite the initial paradisiacal accounts from the Pacific, the Noble Savage had definitely given way to his Ignoble mirror-image in the mainstream of English social thinking, especially in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century. Meek (1976) convincingly demonstrates that it was the Ignoble Savage who became a powerful ideological construct in the English and Scottish Enlightenment. In this period, great emphasis was laid on progress and the four-stage theory, according to which hunters and gatherers represented the first and most primitive and crude stage of human development. From there, it was only a small step to evolutionism and social Darwinism, in which there was no place at all for the Noble part

of the Savage. In France, on the other hand, this aspect remained a powerful device for those who fundamentally criticized the current social order under the Ancien Régime.

The scholar who in modern times has followed the tradition of Montaigne and Rousseau perhaps the closest is the Frenchman Claude Lévi-Strauss. Parts of his *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) present a picture of an anthropologist/philosopher who, in the deep forests of Brazil, is in search of the Golden Age and Man's natural state (Lemaire 1986:235). In a critical, yet sympathetic evaluation of this book, Lemaire (1986) notes that *Tristes Tropiques* basically represents a search for the Temps Perdu of humanity. The message of Lévi-Strauss' anthropology contains a fundamental criticism of our own society, again worked out along the lines of the opposition Savage versus Civilized society. In this respect Lévi-Strauss fits in very well with the tradition of philosophers like Las Casas, Montaigne and Rousseau.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Ignoble Savage*

A remarkable phenomenon is that, until the nineteenth century, the Noble and the Ignoble Savage were inseparable in western thought. True, at times the Noble Savage dominated, and at other times his Ignoble mirror-image did. But generally speaking, the one mytheme has never completely been without the other, at least not until the formation of colonial states and the beginning of modern imperialism and its accompanying social theories. I shall make a few comments on this aspect in the following section. First, however, I shall concern myself with the progress of the Ignoble Savage through western social and philosophical history.

In his major work *Politica*, the Greek philosopher Aristoteles worked out the dichotomy human/non-human. To the first category belonged the Greeks, to the second the non-Greeks. The latter were those who lived out in the woods outside the *polis*, the name applied to whom was *barbaroi*. These were beings without any culture, government or laws. Instead, passions and instincts dominated in their case. In fact, any human qualities were denied them, and as a consequence Aristoteles viewed them as the natural slaves of real human beings, the Greeks.

This conception - the dichotomy humans-*barbaroi* - persisted and was still to be found centuries later. In the eleventh century some Norse expatriates from Iceland landed via Greenland on the northern coast of America. Mason (1987: 581-601), in his interesting analysis of Europe's

<sup>3</sup> Another striking example of the Noble versus Ignoble debate in modern anthropology is the so-called Samoa controversy (Mead-Freeman). In an earlier publication (van Bakel, Borsboom and Dagmar 1986), my co-authors and I pointed out that this controversy bears some resemblance to the Noble-Ignoble discussion. Recently Paxman (1988) elaborated further on this theme and convincingly argued that the Mead-Freeman controversy is, indeed, another example of the double perspective on Polynesian cultures that Westerners have fostered.

perception of others, points out that in sagas relating this expedition there occur the two words *Skraelings* and *Einfoetingr*. The former word is applied indiscriminately to both Eskimos and North American Indians and has the same connotation as the Greek *barbaroi*. The other word refers to a class of one-footed creatures originating from seventh-century sources elsewhere in Europe. These creatures here are said to have been located somewhere in North Africa, and later became familiar to mediaeval Icelandic ethnographers.

Mason postulates a symbolic equivalence between *Skrealings* and *Einfoetingr*, which in the Scandinavian mind resulted in the equation Indian = Eskimo = barbarian = monster. The hero of the sagas, Thorvald, is killed by the *Einfoetingr*, whereas Thorvald's men kill five *Skrealings* who are regarded as outlaws. As in Aristoteles' writings, the unfamiliar beings possess no human qualities and therefore are depicted as barbarians or even monsters. Especially in mediaeval Europe, the Other Person is often portrayed as a monster. Mason (1987:583) labels this category of beings (including one-legged creatures, one-eyed Cyclopes and man-like beings with their heads below their shoulders) 'Plinian races': many of the sources which refer to these monsters have the *Historia Naturalis* by Pliny the Elder as their ultimate source.

In the Renaissance and the Enlightenment the concept of the Plinian races gradually lost importance, although it did not disappear altogether. Even Lafiteau, whose ethnographic reports on American Indians are widely respected, includes representations of some of the Plinian races as inhabitants of Central America (Mason 1987:586).

As was already mentioned in the previous section, the discoveries of the Americas initially favoured the portrayal of their inhabitants as Noble Savages. But soon after some explorers idealized the first stage in the development of man as a Golden Age in which simplicity and peace prevailed, others appeared who framed a theory of progress on the basis of the very same assumption: that the races in America represented human society in its earliest form. This time, however, the conditions of life in that natural state were not depicted as Arcadian, but as harsh and primitive. The people were naked, uncivilized brutes who had neither reason nor laws to govern them. The postulation of such a first stage with all these negative characteristics implied, as Meek notes (1976:17), that human society in a sense had progressed as it moved from the earliest stage to later ones, and that '... this concept of progress was ... inconsistent with any "primitivist" idealization of the first stage'.

An early, influential exponent of this school of thought was Thomas Hobbes, who developed his theory on the original natural state and the progress made from there by humanity in the 17th century. Like the 'Primitivists' of his time, he postulated such a first stage and saw the Americans as the living evidence for his theory. In fact, he was somewhat ambiguous on this point: on the one hand, such a state seems to be a fiction,



on the other hand it is apparently accepted by him as a historical fact. But, unlike the 'Primitivists', Hobbes did not idealize this original state as a Golden Age of humanity.

On the contrary, for him this period represented a level of human existence which no modern civilized European could seriously desire. To the Indians still living in this stage he applied qualifications such as 'poor', 'nasty' and 'brutish'. He also emphasized the fact that there was no 'industry', no 'Culture of the Earth', nor use of commodities, no 'Arts', no 'Letters', no 'Time' and, last but not least, no 'Society' at this level (see Meek 1976:17).

In Hobbes' theory, America occupied a twofold position: the Indians represented a level of existence lacking order and laws, and at the same time they reminded Europeans of the potential anarchy inherent in their own nature as human beings (Lemaire 1986:142-3). This anarchy was currently under control thanks to an elaborate system of laws. In this theory the Indian way of life was a model for those human conditions which the modern state had overcome thanks to laws and the creation of a political order.

With the discoveries of the Americas, the Plinian monsters slowly faded into the background, only to be replaced by beings of such an inferior nature as to make their human qualities questionable, too. Meek, in his book entitled *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (1976), worked out in great detail how the conception of the Ignoble Savage contributed to the so-called four-stage theory in the eighteenth century. In this theory the most important parameter in the development of human society is mode of subsistence. The American Indians were the (still) living representatives of the lowest stage: that of hunters and gatherers. From there, man evolved pasturing, agriculture and commerce or industry. The study of the American Indians would certainly help to illuminate how humanity had once started and how it had developed from there (Meek 1976:37).

From this four-stage theory of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment it seems only a small step to the emergence of the classical evolution theory in the nineteenth century. Like the adherents of the four-stage theory, evolutionists like E.B. Tylor also tried to construct an all-embracing theory of the development of human society. Here, too, the key word is 'progress': progress from savagery as still represented by contemporary hunter and gatherer societies to civilization as it had developed in Europe. The Indians were survivals from a remote past and the study of them provided an insight into the rude beginnings of our own civilization.

In the political field the idea of progress went hand in hand with the emergence of social Darwinism ('survival of the fittest'), thus providing a neat explanation for the extinction or subordination of the 'lesser races' as a result of colonialism. At the same time these conceptions justified colonialism. In the social sciences, classical evolutionism with its emphasis on development through various stages resulted in the creation of a series

of origin myths, for which hunters and gatherers stood model once again.

By this time an important geographical shift had taken place. In many writings the Australian Aborigines had taken over the role of the Ignoble Savage from the American Indians. Unlike their American counterparts, the Aborigines hardly ever had the honour to feature as Noble Savage. By the time Europe had learned about the existence of the Aborigines, the four-stage theory of the Enlightenment was well established and evolutionism was on the verge of being born. Although discoveries elsewhere in the Pacific had given a new impulse to the conception of the Noble Savage, mainly the Tahitians and Hawaiians were classified as such. Smith (1985) distinguishes between 'soft primitivism' (the afore-mentioned islanders) and 'hard primitivism', of which the Aborigines were regarded as exponents.

From classical times onwards the inhabitants of the antipodes had been depicted as what has been called above 'Plinian races', namely as monsters with inverse human characteristics. The first European eyewitness reports from Australia did not exactly mention monsters, but to the Dutch, as well as to the early English explorer Dampier, the Aborigines (New Hollanders) represented the most miserable people on earth who had nothing to offer. In a way they possessed inverse human characteristics, like the Plinian races. They were naked, and had no language and no fixed habitation. Even James Cook - who comes closest to a Noble Savage conception of the Aborigines - admitted that they '... move about from place to place like wild Beasts in search of food' (quoted from Turner Strong 1986:180). The judgment that prevailed in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century has more affinity with Dampier's description than with Cook's.

Turner Strong (1986:181), who gives an analysis of the position of Aborigines in European social thought up till 1845, notes in this respect that a '... few sympathetic appraisals of Aborigines appeared in journals of exploration and colonization, especially after 1830, but these foundered in general disdain'. Some decades earlier, Lord Monboddo had expressed the view that the New Hollanders, as described by Dampier, were illustrative of the link between humans and the orangutang; here humans (Aborigines) had advanced only slightly beyond the animal world.

The theory of evolutionism, as Broome explains (1982:93), led to a worldwide interest in the Australian Aborigines. By the end of the 19th century, phrases like 'survival of the fittest' and 'white superiority' had become very familiar with the general public.

As was already indicated above, the Aborigines became equally famous as central characters in a number of origin myths. Cowlishaw (1987:221) sums up the role of the Aborigines in some of the most influential origin myths in anthropology. He indicates that Morgan used Fison and Howitt's work (*Kamilaroi and Kurnai*, 1880) to illustrate the 'lowest level of kinship'; Frazer used Baldwin Spencer's evidence of the most primitive form of religion in Central Australia; Freud (*Totem and Tabu*) had the primal

horde exemplified in Australia; and Durkheim discovered elementary forms of religion in the works of Spencer and Gillen and of Strehlow.

The preoccupation with origins and evolution was so strong that field workers who provided detailed and accurate ethnographical accounts were unable to alter the current view on Aboriginal society. Turner Strong (1986:186), for example, refers to the ethnographical accounts by Eyre and Grey (1841), but concludes that they, too, were only '... marginally successful in their attempts to counter contemptuous typification of Aboriginal Australians as among the lowest of human beings'. Herbert Spencer grouped the Aborigines together with the Fuegians, Andamans and Veddahs under the heading 'Uncivilized Societies: Types of Lowest Races'. This kind of typification persisted until well into the twentieth century. The Aborigines had become everything which the Europeans were not: the antipodes of the Europeans, who positioned themselves at the other end of the evolutionary scale. Aborigines as Ignoble Savages came to exemplify the primitive Other against whom Europeans measured themselves (Turner Strong 1986:175).

#### *Mytheme and Conceptualization*

The American Indians and the people of the Pacific (including the Australian Aborigines) are not only historical and geographical realities but also ideological constructs. In the latter sense they stood model for both the Noble and the Ignoble Savage. Foster's remarks (1982:21-39) about similar constructs, such as The Exotic, also hold for that of the Savage: it has a variegated and complicated history, closely linked with the expansion of western culture. This construct represents anti-society and includes whatever might be '... conceived as beyond the margins of the commonplace; its deviant and even horrifying aspects are documented along with the heightened, artistic aspects' (Foster 1982:24, concerning the Egyptian variant of the Exotic).

The Concept of the Savage has become a key concept in the European social ideology of the Other. It has two seemingly incompatible meanings: that of a noble and that of an ignoble creature. Yet both meanings have travelled, so to speak, hand in hand through the history of European social thinking. At one time the noble aspect tends to dominate, at another time the ignoble, while sometimes both are equally important and provoke polemic discussions. More than once, both have even appeared simultaneously in the mind and writings of one and the same person. A striking example of this ambiguity can be found in De Tocqueville's work *Democracy in America* (1830). According to him, the Indian shared in the savagery of the woods, and was ignorant, poor and merciless in war. Yet, at the same time, he was equal and free and hospitable in peace. Life in the ancient and uncultivated forests had enabled him to preserve the lost classical virtues of Sparta and early Rome (see Sinclair 1977:141).

This short extract sums up the ambiguous conception of the Other,

whose characteristics are often separated in an either—or category, but more than once also combined in both—and. It suggests that, despite the opposed qualities ascribed to the Savage, these qualities may emerge from a common background. Is there such a common basis? Part of the answer may lie in the way in which the cultural devices by which we discriminate between Ourselves and the Other are selected. Leach (1982:18) mentions at least three such devices, which provide the primary foci of observation nearly everywhere: food, nakedness and sexuality. Relating this to the European tradition, I would like to add political and moral order, or the absence thereof; reason and knowledge versus intuition and passion; and communal versus private ownership.

Perhaps other devices are also applicable, but those mentioned by Leach and the additions given here provide themes which recur constantly in writings about the Savage, either Noble or Ignoble. These cultural devices are invariably used to typify the Savage and to contrast his society with European civilization. These are the lines along which the comparison between European society on the one hand, and pastoral or hunting and gathering societies on the other is made. Sexual promiscuity and freedom are contrasted with strict moral rules and restrictions, nakedness with the wearing of clothes (and etiquette and conventions), living off the fruits of the land with production, communality with individuality, and order with absence of order.

These contrasts may even be carried further to the generalized opposition normal/abnormal (Leach 1982:116), or society/anti-society (Foster 1982:25). Such pairs of oppositions constitute means of articulating Europe's identity. These categories, as Leach remarks (Leach 1982:116), provide us with a mental map and tell us where we are and who we are.

That observations of the Other should result in such opposite characterizations as Noble versus Ignoble is not a corollary of the cultural devices singled out - these are practically always the same - but flows from the relative position of the observer 'fathoming' them.<sup>4</sup> I have borrowed the

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<sup>4</sup> As such, the mytheme bears some resemblance to the more limited concept of 'national character' as a means of designating the Other. The most striking features are, firstly, the use of the same kinds of descriptive concepts, which are characterized by three main dimensions: categorical, qualitative and normative. Secondly, there is a strikingly small number of these concepts, which are therefore used again and again to define either the mytheme of the Savage or the concept of the 'national character'. Descriptions of the latter also vary according to the relative position of the observer. It is therefore sometimes said that descriptions of the Other by means of concepts like 'the Savage' or 'national character' are more informative about the observer than about the people observed. There is, however, an important, and little researched, factor, which compels us to be cautious about such a conclusion: the content of the mytheme was not only subject to the changing relative positions of the observers, but was also part of particular *literary traditions*. These traditions varied from one linguistic community to the other in Europe, and may very well have differed under the influence of different rhythms. These varied descriptive-traditions added an important element of conservatism to social and philosophical debates (see Kommers, 1987:65-83; for a different approach I refer to White 1976).

term 'fathoming' from Turner Strong (1986), who defines it as measuring of a particular sort: when one ascertains the depth of water by throwing a fathom line overboard, one relies explicitly on one's own position with respect to that which is being measured. The emphasis is on the position of the observer who experiences the Other and selects some of the aforementioned cultural devices to measure the unknown. The Arcadian conception of the Savage is mainly to be found among those who are critical of the European process of civilization. This particular conception is a mytheme constructed for purposes of criticizing developments in one's own society. It constitutes an accusation against European society. By contrast, champions of European civilization and its progress abhor the Savage and use the same cultural devices (nakedness, food, sex) to justify Europe's position.

Given the importance of the relative position of the observer, it is most relevant to take the socio-historical context in which he lives into consideration. An eighteenth-century French scholar is more likely to depict the Savage as Noble than his contemporary in England and Scotland, while in Spain and Portugal the Noble Savage had vanished almost completely by that time.

In an attempt to understand this phenomenon I once again turn to Lemaire (1986:160-161), who relates the construction of the concept of either the Noble or the Ignoble Savage to the process of civilization in the respective countries. Taking the middle of the eighteenth century as a starting point, Lemaire notes that French intellectuals were then beginning to develop radical ideas, aiming at revolutionary changes in the current political and social order (see also Bitterli 1985:277). In this context they regarded the American Indian in his role as Noble Savage as an important device for airing their dissatisfaction with the existing order in their own society. Their aim was not so much to adopt the noble customs of the Indians as to attack contemporary French society. After the accomplishment of the relevant radical changes (the French revolution), the Noble Savage gradually faded away for the time being. It seemed that he had fulfilled his function and that there was little place for him after the revolution had altered the political and social order of the Ancien Régime.

In England the transition from feudalism to bourgeois society was more or less completed by that time, and there was little need for a Noble Savage as an ideological catalyst to effect changes. On the contrary, the Savage appeared in his Ignoble quality to be becoming a basic element in the four-stage theory and the evolutionism of the nineteenth century. His role was not only to legitimize the ongoing process of civilization, but also to encourage its further development: to move away as fast as possible from that first savage stage of which contemporary hunters and gatherers were the tangible manifestations.

With regard to Spain and Portugal, where the idea of the Noble Savage met with little response in that period, Lemaire wonders whether or not

this may have been attributable to the relative stagnation in the process of civilization, in contrast to the fifteenth and the early sixteenth century, when the mediaeval Christian world view was in process of change in these parts of Europe. Then the Noble Savage had played a prominent role, as the afore-mentioned writings of Columbus, Vespucci, and especially Las Casas testify. But later, neither the Noble nor the Ignoble Savage played a significant part in the social discourse of these countries.

So it seems that the Noble Savage is most likely to appear where society is on the verge of radical changes, or rather, where philosophers, writers and social activists are trying to bring about such changes. His advocates do not so much want to transfer his noble customs and characteristics to their own society as to use them as powerful devices for fundamental criticism of what is going on in their own society. When the required transition has been accomplished, either gradually (England) or radically (France), the ideological construct of the Savage will either fade away or appear as Ignoble, the latter to justify and legitimate the process of civilization and its further development.

### *Conclusion*

The discovery of the Americas may be said to represent the first major phase in the modern history of exploration, for it radically altered ancient geographical theories and the classical world view. But at the same time their discovery - more than the exploration of tropical Africa, which in early and mediaeval history was confined to coastal areas - offered opportunities to contrast European civilization with societies of hunters and gatherers.

Until that time the classical content of the mytheme of the Savage had been mainly developed in confrontation with horticulturalists, pastoralists and peasants. Nevertheless the classical content inspired the explorers of the Americas when trying to assess the nature of the hunters and gatherers they encountered. In the sixteenth and the early seventeenth century the mytheme of the Savage, Noble or Ignoble, came to be intimately linked, if not identified, with societies of hunters and gatherers.

But the old mytheme proved its adaptability again when Europeans, during the history of their explorations, met yet other peoples, viz. the islanders of Oceania. The exploration of the Pacific may be described as the last major phase in the history of discovery as viewed from the ancient geographical perspective, as it was inspired by the classical concept of *Terra Australis*. Eventually it resulted in the discovery not only of that unknown continent, but also of completely new worlds. In the eighteenth century the mytheme at first lost its exclusive link with societies of hunters and gatherers and again proved a convenient concept for characterizing horticulturalists (in this case those of the Pacific archipelagos) as Noble creatures. Subsequently, from the late eighteenth century onwards, the Australian Aborigines as hunters and gatherers came to play a prominent

role in the old mytheme. However, by this time there was only room for the Savage in his Ignoble quality. The doubts which had existed for centuries evaporated and were replaced by an unequivocal and lasting feeling of superiority which came to dominate European social thinking.

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