“It is Good to Know Something of Various Peoples’ Ways of Life”*

Olivier Herrenschmidt

It is good to know something of various peoples’ ways of life so that we may judge our own more soundly and not think—as those who have seen nothing of the world often do—that every departure from our way of life is ridiculous and irrational ... The greatest benefit I extracted from [my] observations was their showing me many things which, although seeming wild and ridiculous to us, are nevertheless commonly accepted in other great nations; which taught me not to believe too firmly anything I had been convinced of only by example and custom

Descartes, Discourse on Method

Postcolonial ideology (an “avatar” of postmodernism) is still alive and well in the thinking of many Indian and Western researchers in anthropology, history and Sanskrit studies, whether the former reside in India or are part of the American academic establishment, and Edward Said and his “Orientalism” continue to be the backdrop for that approach.2

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* Translation by Amy Jacobs. My thanks to Charles Macdonald for his comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this text.


2 A. Raghuramaraju wrote that “in an important sense, Said is very central to postcolonial discourse” but “unlike many postcolonial thinkers” he failed to recognize “the internal tensions within the west, or the internal project of modernity”: “It is necessary to preface our discussion of what the west did through colonialism to non-Western societies with the question ‘What did Western modernity do to its own pre-modern societies?’”. The author cites the passage by Descartes that I have used as my title and epigraph to show that the “other” as constructed by postcolonialist thinkers was only of marginal interest for Descartes, whose tone was “very
In Hyderabad in December 2001, in the process of trying to get in touch with an Indian professor who is a specialist on the Dalits (former “Untouchables”) and a determined activist, I found myself speaking with a female professor close to him who was quite well-known in radical circles. I was doing an ethnographic study on lower castes in village life, and in 1998 I had taken part in a seminar in India on Ambedkar. I therefore believed that the two of us would be on common, friendly ground. I was wrong. She dismissed several of the female researchers I mentioned with the accusation that they were “former Stalinists”, then dismissed my own research on low-caste Hindu Fishers with a remark as absurd as it was irrefutable: “Who says they’re Hindus?” Her point was that I had simply assumed they were. Then came the ultimate condemnation: “You’re nothing but a Western leftist with left universalism.” At that point, the conflict between us became scientifically, politically and ideologically serious. For of course her negation of universalism (a term which does not admit of adjectival qualification) necessarily called to the mind of this seasoned Western leftist the assertion that science had no right to be if it was not proletarian.

Back in France I organized a two-year seminar on postcolonialism and its supporters and detractors for ethnology students at my university (Paris 10-Nanterre). I did so because it was obvious that ideological critique of this...