“Tout Autre est Tout Autre”

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Confrontation with peoples from different ethnicities no longer has the power to shake Western identities in the way it had during the period of decolonization and before. It is as though all forms of social difference are now easily bridgeable. This is arguable. But the necessity for the production of social difference still exists if one follows. Jacques Derrida’s essay on the animal.

If all essents went up in smoke,
it is the noses that would differentiate
and appreciate them.
Heraclitus, Fragment 7

I. The “Other” revised

The “other” taken into account by ethnography has been the peoples of different cultures. That type of otherness is suspect today. Suspect to such a degree that the practice of ethnography, particularly in the United States, has been revised. One is not surprised to read that an American anthropologist has lived in a part of the world remote from her country, has become fluent in the language, has spent years there and has discovered no important differences, at least once the anthropologist attends to the persons she knows. When ethnography takes this form it can be accused of undermining its own first assumptions. In France the conclusions drawn from this state of affairs have been brought to the fore with such force that many ethnographers feel that their discipline is threatened. The opening of the Musée du Quai Branly was also the closing of the ethnographic section of the famous Musée de l’Homme. The rich collections of the latter were transferred to the new museum. “Really, one could think one is dreaming. Everything one reads on the subject is unbelievable.”2 Thus remarked the eminent anthropologist Louis Dumont when the project was announced. It is “unbelievable” that the ethnographic museum might disappear. It, according to Dumont, makes the work of ethnographers available to the public. It forms a part of their instruction. It tells them, he implies, of the peoples of the world. Without it they would be ignorant. One is in a world of dreams if one thinks one could live without ethnography.3 The anthropologist Jean Jamin published an article at the time, “Faut il brûler les musées d’ethnographie?” (“Is it Necessary to Burn the Museums of Ethnography?”), the answer to which would be “yes” if
the ethnographic other is not merely out of date but morally and politically suspect as many think.

The question was the nature of the value of the museum objects. The new museum was seen by anthropologists as an art museum. But this was disputed. The purpose of the museum, said President Chirac in his address at its inauguration, was to honor peoples formerly despised. The new museum would “render justice to the infinite diversity of cultures” and in doing so would “manifest another regard for the spirit of peoples and civilizations of Africa, Asia and Oceania.” One might think that the ethnographic museum from which the bulk of the collections came, the Musée de l’Homme, had done just this. It is the calling of ethnography, indeed, to “render justice” to the diversity of peoples. But listening to President Chirac, one has the impression that the ethnographic museum had to be dismantled for there to be “a new view” for diversity, both of “peoples” and of “civilizations.” And of course the diversity displayed at the Musée de l’Homme reflected the understanding of peoples under colonial rule. An entirely different approach was called for, one that would dissipate the aura of colonialism the old museum emanated and so put the relation of France to its former colonies on another basis. That the new institution does not have a more descriptive title reflects the inability to find a suitable term for ethnographic artifacts that have become aesthetic objects.

Throughout his speech Chirac spoke in pairs – sometimes it was “peoples and civilizations,” sometimes “arts and civilizations.” There was no dispute about the word “civilization” as there might have been fifty years earlier. But between “art” and “people” there was a choice to be made. Ostensibly there was to be room for both, but most ethnographers are not clear that room was left for their study. There had been a passionate debate between ethnographers on one side and art historians, curators and dealers on the other. It concerned first of all the designation of what was to be in the new museum. The objects were mainly (but not entirely) from the Musée de l’Homme. Were they then still to be used to illustrate the lives of peoples, or were they now to be shown for their aesthetic value? One question was how best to understand “others” (not to mention who exactly these others are or were); another was how to “honor” them. It was necessary to “multiply points of view” in order to give a certain “depth” to the “arts and civilizations of all the continents.” In order to do that, old views had to be “dissipated.” It was not only the outdated views of ethnographers but those of the general public which were in question. The prejudice in which the ex-colonial peoples were held had to be erased, and this would come about by showing the cultural achievements of these peoples. The word “other” here persisted, but it passed between the “other view” (“ours,” the viewers) to the change in the status of the others (“them”), those to be viewed otherwise.