

# The Observation of Savage Peoples

*Joseph-Marie Degérando*

## I Advertisement

These considerations are addressed to Captain BAUDIN, correspondent of the society, about to leave for his expedition of discovery, and to the various observers accompanying him; they are addressed also to Citizen LEVAILLANT, who is going to attempt a third expedition in the interior of Africa. Since it is possible that both have occasion to encounter peoples at very different degrees of civilization or barbarity, it seems the right course to provide for any hypothesis, and to make these CONSIDERATIONS so general that they can be applied to any society differing in its moral and political forms from those of Europe. The leading purpose has been to provide a complete framework comprising any point of view from which these societies can be envisaged by the philosopher. It has not been supposed that certain simple questions that can easily be foreseen should be omitted, when they were necessary to the completeness of the whole.

It seems astonishing that, in an age of egoism, it is so difficult to persuade man that of all studies, the most important is that of himself. This is because egoism, like all passions, is blind. The attention of the egoist is directed to the immediate needs of which his senses give notice, and cannot be raised to those reflective needs that reason discloses to us; his aim is satisfaction, not perfection. He considers only his individual self; his species is nothing to him. Perhaps he fears that in penetrating the mysteries of his being he will ensure his own abasement, blush at his discoveries, and meet his conscience.

True philosophy, always at one with moral science, tells a different tale. The source of useful illumination, we are told, like that of lasting content, is in ourselves. Our insight depends above all on the state of our faculties; but how can we bring our faculties to perfection if we do not know their nature and their laws? The elements of happiness are the moral sentiments; but how can we develop these

Joseph-Marie Degérando, pp. 61–70, 101–104 from *The Observation of Savage Peoples*, trans. F. C. T. Moore. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969[1800]. Copyright © F. C. T. Moore.

*Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader*, Second Edition. Edited by Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Jeffrey A. Sluka.  
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Published 2012 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

sentiments without considering the principle of our affections, and the means of directing them? We become better by studying ourselves; the man who thoroughly knows himself is the wise man. Such reflection on the nature of his being brings a man to a better awareness of all the bonds that unite us to our fellows, to the re-discovery at the inner root of his existence of that identity of common life actuating us all, to feeling the full force of that fine maxim of the ancients: 'I am a man, and nothing human is alien to me.'

But what are the means of the proper study of man? Here the history of philosophy, and the common voice of learned men give reply. The time for systems is past. Weary of its centuries of vain agitation in vain theories, the pursuit of learning has settled at last on the way of observation. It has recognized nature as its true master. All its art is applied in listening carefully to that voice, and sometimes in asking it questions. The Science of Man too is a natural science, a science of observation, the most noble of all. What science does not aspire to be a natural science? Even art, which men sometimes contrast with nature, aims only to imitate her.

The method of observation has a sure procedure; it gathers facts to compare them, and compares them to know them better. The natural sciences are in a way no more than a series of comparisons. As each particular phenomenon is ordinarily the result of the combined action of several causes, it would be only a deep mystery for us if we considered it on its own: but if it is compared with analogous phenomena, they throw light each on the other. The particular action of each cause we see as distinct and independent, and general laws are the result. Good observation requires analysis; now, one carries out analysis in philosophy by comparisons, as in chemistry by the play of chemical affinities.

Man, as he appears to us in the individuals around us, is modified at the same time by a multitude of varying circumstances, by education, climate, political institutions, customs, established opinions, by the effects of imitation, by the influence of the factitious needs that he has created. Among so many diverse causes that unite to produce that great and interesting

effect, we can never disentangle the precise action that belongs to each, without finding terms of comparison to isolate man from the particular circumstances in which he is presented to us, and to lift from him those adventitious forms under which, as it were, art has hidden from our eyes the work of nature.

Now, of all the terms of comparison that we can choose, there is none more fascinating, more fruitful in useful trains of thought than that offered by savage peoples. Here we can remove first the variations pertaining to the climate, the organism, the habits of physical life, and we shall notice that among nations much less developed by the effect of moral institutions, these natural variations are bound to emerge much more prominently: being less distinguished by secondary circumstances, they must chiefly be so by the first and fundamental circumstances belonging to the very principle of existence. Here we shall be able to find the material needed to construct an exact scale of the various degrees of civilization, and to assign to each its characteristic properties; we shall come to know what needs, what ideas, what habits are produced in each era of human society. Here, since the development of passions and of intellectual faculties is much more limited, it will be much easier for us to penetrate their nature, and determine their fundamental laws. Here, since different generations have exercised only the slightest influence on each other, we shall in a way be taken back to the first periods of our own history; we shall be able to set up secure experiments on the origin and generation of ideas, on the formation and development of language, and on the relations between these two processes. The philosophical traveller, sailing to the ends of the earth, is in fact travelling in time; he is exploring the past; every step he makes is the passage of an age. Those unknown islands that he reaches are for him the cradle of human society. Those peoples whom our ignorant vanity scorns are displayed to him as ancient and majestic monuments of the origin of ages: monuments infinitely more worthy of our admiration and respect than those famous pyramids vaunted by the banks of the Nile. They witness only the frivolous ambition and the passing power of some

Importance  
of the study  
of Man in  
general.

Of the  
observation  
of savages  
in  
particular.

individuals whose names have scarcely come down to us; but the others recreate for us the state of our own ancestors, and the earliest history of the world.

And even should we not see in savage peoples a useful object of instruction for ourselves, would there not be enough high feelings of philanthropy to make us give a high importance to the contact that we can make with them? What more moving plan than that of re-establishing in such a way the august ties of universal society, of finding once more those former kinsmen separated by long exile from the rest of the common family, of offering a hand to them to raise them to a happier state! You who, led by a generous devotion on those far shores, will soon come near their lonely huts, go before them as the representatives of all humanity! Give them in that name the vow of brotherly alliance! Wipe from their minds the memory of cruel adventurers who sought to stay with them only to rob or bring them into slavery; go to them only to offer benefits. Bring them our arts, and not our corruption, the standard of our morality, and not the example of our vices, our sciences, and not our scepticism, the advantages of civilization, and not its abuses; conceal from them that in these countries too, though more enlightened, men destroy each other in combat, and degrade each other by their passions. Sitting near them, amid their lonely forests and on their unknown shores, speak to them only of peace, of unity, of useful work; tell them that, in those empires unknown to them, that you have left to visit them, there are men who pray for their happiness, who greet them as brothers, and who join with all their hearts in the generous intentions which lead you among them.

In expressing here everything that we expect of your careful and laborious work, we are far from wishing to underestimate the many services done to society by the explorers who have gone before you. Had they merely prepared the way, by their brave undertakings, for those who were to follow them, and provided valuable guidance, by that alone they would have earned a great title to our gratitude. But they began to establish some communication with savage societies; they have reported to us various information on the

customs and language of these peoples. It is merely that, divided by other concerns, and with a greater impetus to discover new countries than to study them, constantly moving when they should have stayed at rest, biased perhaps by those unjust prejudices that cast a slur in our eyes on savage societies, or at least, witness of our European indifference for them, they did not sufficiently devote themselves to bringing back exact and complete observations; they have met the invariable end of those who observe in a precipitate and superficial manner – their observations have been poor, and the imperfection of their reports has been the penalty of our carelessness.<sup>1</sup> Since man's curiosity is aroused more by the novelties that strike his senses than by any instruction that his reason may gather, it was thought far more worth while to bring back from these countries plants, animals and mineral substances, than observations on the phenomena of thought. So naturalists daily enriched their specimen cases with many genera, while philosophers spent time in vain disputes in their schools about the nature of man, instead of uniting to study him in the arena of the universe.

Let us review the main faults of the observations on savage man made by these explorers, and the gaps that they have left in their accounts. When we realize what they have not done, we shall see better what remains to be done.

The first fault that we notice in the observations of explorers on savages is their incompleteness; it was only to be expected, given the shortness of their stay, the division of their attention, and the absence of any regular tabulation of their findings. Sometimes, confining themselves to the study of some isolated individuals, they have given us no information on their social condition, and have thus deprived us of the means of estimating the influence which these social relations might have on individual faculties. Sometimes, pausing on the smallest details of the physical life of the savages, they have given us scarcely any details of their moral customs. Sometimes, describing the customs of grown men, they have failed to find out about the kind of education received in childhood and youth: and above all, pre-occupied almost entirely with the external and

First fault.

Faults in the observations made up to the present.

overt characteristics of a people, of its ceremonies and of its dress, they have generally taken too little care to be initiated in the far more important circumstances of its theoretical life, of its needs, its ideas, its passions, its knowledge, its laws. They have described forms rather than given instructive reports; they have marked certain effects, and explained scarcely any causes.

Second fault.

Further, such insufficient observations have not always been very certain or authentic, whether because they have sometimes been too particular, and explorers have wished to judge a society by a few of its members, a character by a few actions, or because they have sometimes confined themselves to hearsay, to the stories of the Savages whom they met, and who perhaps were not properly understood, perhaps not well-versed in what was asked, and perhaps had no interest in telling the truth, or at least in making it known in its entirety.

Third fault.

We should add that these observations have been badly ordered, and even in many cases quite without order. The explorers had not enough understood that there is a natural connection between the various facts that one gathers about the condition and character of societies, that this order is necessary to the precision of the individual facts, and that often some of them should serve as preparation for the others. We should study effects before trying to go back to first principles; observe individuals before trying to judge the society; become acquainted with domestic relations inside families before examining the political relations of society; and above all we should aim at full mutual understanding when we speak to men before basing certain conclusions on the accounts that we claim to have received.

Fourth fault.

Often explorers have based the accounts that they bring us on incorrect or at least on dubious hypotheses. For example, they habitually judge the customs of Savages by analogies drawn from our own customs, when in fact they are so little related to each other. Thus, given certain actions, they suppose certain opinions or needs because among us such actions ordinarily result from these needs or opinions. They make the Savage reason as we do, when the Savage does not himself explain to them his reasoning. So they often pronounce

excessively severe judgments on a society accused of cruelty, theft, licentiousness, and atheism. It were wiser to gather a large number of facts, before trying to explain them, and to allow hypothesis only after exhausting the light of experience.

Fifth fault.

In the case of the accounts of explorers there is another cause of uncertainty, a fault of language rather than of imperfect observation, namely that the terms used to pass on to us the results of their observations are often in our own language of vague and ill-determined meaning. Consequently, we are in danger of taking their accounts in a way which they did not intend. This happens particularly when they try to record the religious, moral, and political beliefs of a people. It happens too when instead of giving a detailed and circumstantial account of what they have actually seen, they limit themselves to summary descriptions of the impressions which they received, and of the general judgments which they inferred on the character of peoples. Yet this drawback could easily have been avoided by making it a policy either to describe things without judging them, or to choose expressions whose sense is more agreed, or to give a precise stipulation of the sense in which one intends their use.

Sixth fault.

This is not the place to enumerate the inaccuracies springing from a lack of impartiality in explorers, from prejudices imposed by their particular opinions, from the interests of vanity or the impulse of resentment. The character of the worthy men today devoting themselves to this noble undertaking is a sufficient guarantee that such a stamp will never shape their accounts. But explorers with the purest and most honest intentions have often been led into error about the character of peoples by the behaviour they meet with. They have inferred too lightly from the circumstances of their reception, conclusions about the absolute and ordinary character of the men among whom they have penetrated. They have failed to consider sufficiently that their presence was bound to be a natural source of fear, defiance, and reserve; that reasons of policy might exaggerate this unusual circumstance; that the memory of former attacks might have left dark prejudices in the mind of such peoples;

that a community might be gentle and sociable, and yet believe itself in a state of natural war with strangers whose intentions are unknown; and finally that for a just estimate of the character of a tribe, one should first leave time for the reactions of astonishment, terror, and anxiety bound to arise in the beginning to be dispelled, and secondly one should be able to be initiated into the ordinary relations which the members of the community have with each other.

Seventh  
fault.

But of all the regrets left by the accounts of the explorers who went before you, the strongest is their failure to tell us of the language of the peoples visited. In the first place, the scanty information which they do give lacks precision and exactness, whether because they fail to record how they went about questioning the Savages, or because they themselves have often taken little care to pose the questions properly. The demonstrative and natural gestures which they have used to ask the Savages the names of objects were often themselves liable to considerable uncertainty; one cannot know if those who were questioned understood the gestures in the same way as the explorers who were using them, and so whether they were giving proper replies to their questions. Further, to provide us with some useful and positive ideas of the idioms of savage peoples, it was wrong for explorers to limit themselves as they did to taking at random names of various objects with scarcely any relation between them; at least a family of analogous ideas should have been followed up, when it was impossible to make a record of the whole language, so that some judgment could be made on the generation of terms, and on the relations between them; it was not enough to be content with some detached words; but it would have been sensible to record whole sentences to give some idea of the construction of discourse. Further, one should have discovered whether these words were simple, or composite, as their length would often lead us to suppose; whether they were qualified by any articles or particles; and finally whether they were inflected or remained in the absolute, and whether they were liable to any kind of grammatical laws.

Eighth  
fault.

Failing to acquaint themselves thoroughly with the idiom of savage peoples, explorers

have been powerless to draw on perhaps the most interesting ideas that could have been available. They have been unable to pass on the traditions that such peoples may preserve of their origin, of the changes that they have undergone, and of the various details of their history; traditions which perhaps would have thrown great light on the important question of how the world was peopled, and on the various causes of the present state of these societies. They have been unable to explain the significance of a mass of ceremonies and customs which are probably no more than allegorical; they have given us bizarre descriptions which tickle the idle curiosity of the many, but which offer no useful instruction to the philosophically minded. Lacking the means to carry on connected conversation with such peoples, they have been able to form only very hazardous and vague ideas of their opinions and notions; finally, they have been unable to provide us with these data, as revealing as they are abundant, that the language of a society presents on its way of seeing and feeling, and on the most intimate and essential features of its character.

The main object, therefore, that should today occupy the attention and zeal of a truly philosophical traveller would be the careful gathering of all means that might assist him to penetrate the thought of the peoples among whom he would be situated, and to account for the order of their actions and relationships. This is not only because such study is in itself the most important of all, it is also because it must stand as a necessary preliminary and introduction to all the others. It is a delusion to suppose that one can properly observe a people whom one cannot understand and with whom one cannot converse. The first means to the proper knowledge of the Savages, is to become after a fashion like one of them; and it is by learning their language that we shall become their fellow citizens.

Observations  
to make.  
1. Signs of the  
Savages.

But if there is a marked lack of good methods even for learning well the languages of neighbouring civilized nations; if this study often requires much time and effort, what position shall we be in for learning the idioms of savage tribes, when there is no dictionary, no spokesman to translate to us, and no shared habits and common associations of ideas as in

the case of the former languages, through which explanations can be made? Let us not hesitate to say that the art of properly studying these languages, if it could be reduced to rules, would be one of the master-works of philosophy; it can be the result only of long meditation on the origin of ideas. We shall confine ourselves here to making some general remarks; the reflective thought of the enlightened men to whom we address them will assure their development, and direct their application.

The most important thing to observe in the study of the signs of Savages, is the order of the enquiry.

[...]

Conclusion

We are aware that the totality of problems here posed for the explorer's wisdom calls for a huge amount of work, whether because of the number and the very importance of the questions, or the detailed and painstaking observations that each one demands. We are aware that this work is surrounded by all kinds of difficulties, and that one must expect to meet great obstacles in the first relations that one wishes to establish with the Savages. For these peoples cannot penetrate the real intentions of those who approach them, they cannot easily distinguish their friends from their enemies, and those who bring help, from those who come to invade their territory. But we may rightly expect anything of the patience, the perseverance, and the heroic courage of the travellers to whom today we bid farewell; we are assured of it by their personal character, by the intentions animating them, by the dazzling proofs which they have already vouchsafed. Oh! What have they not already done for science, what noble course have they not already run! It was worthy of them still to defer its term, and to go on to complete so fine a work! Estimable men, as we salute you here on the eve of a departure soon to come, as we see you tear yourselves from your land, your family, and your friends, and leap beyond the limits of the civilized world; as we dwell on the thought of the fatigues, the privations and the dangers which await you, and of that long exile to which you have voluntarily condemned yourselves, our souls cannot resist a deep emotion, and the movement of sensibility in us

is joined to the respect which we owe to so noble an undertaking. But our thought is settled in advance on the term of that undertaking; and dwelling on this prospect, all our feelings are mixed in that of admiration and enthusiasm. Illustrious messengers of philosophy, peaceful heroes, the conquests which you are going to add to the domain of science have more brilliance and value in our eyes than victories bought by the blood of men! All generous hearts, all friends of humanity join in your sublime mission; there is in this place more than one heart which envies you, which groans in secret that inflexible duties keep him on these shores, who would put his glory in following your path and your example. Our prayers at least will follow you across the Ocean, or in the lap of the desert; our thoughts will often be with you, when below the equator, or near the pole, you gather in silence precious treasures for enlightenment. We shall say to each other: 'On this day, at this hour, they are landing perhaps on an unknown land, they are perhaps penetrating to the heart of a new people, perhaps they are resting in the shade of antique forests from their long sufferings; perhaps they are beginning to enter into relations with a barbarous people, to eliminate its unsociable suspicions, to inspire in it a curiosity to know our ways and a desire to imitate them, and perhaps they are laying the foundations of a new Europe.' Oh! who will tell in fact all the possible or probable results which may spring one day from these fine undertakings? I speak here not only of our fuller specimen cases, our more accurate and extensive maps, of our increased knowledge of the physical and moral history of the world, of the name of France taken to unknown shores! Think of the other bewitching prospects still offered to the reeling imagination! Trade extended by new relations; the navy brought to perfection by greater experience; journeys made easier by discoveries; our political grandeur increased by new colonies or new alliances! Who can tell? Perhaps whole nations civilized, receiving from civilization the power to multiply themselves, and associate themselves with us by the ties of a vast confederation; perhaps broader and more useful careers open to human ambition, talent and

industry; these peoples of Europe, daily contesting at the cost of their blood some narrow strip of land, expanding at pleasure in more beautiful terrain; perhaps a new world forming itself at the extremities of the earth; the whole globe covered with happier and wiser inhabitants, more equally provided for, more closely joined, society raising itself to more rapid progress by greater competition and reaching perhaps by these unexpected changes that perfection on which our prayers call, but to which our enlightenment, our methods, and our books, contribute so little! ... Vain chimerae perhaps; but chimerae to which our long unhappiness, our sad dissensions, and the sight of our corruption, yet give so much charm! ... At least it is certain that these brave enterprises, directed to the most obscure parts of the Universe, lay up for posterity a new future, and that it is only for the wisdom of our descendants to gather the abundant fruits of this course that you are going to open. See how much the discoveries of Columbus changed the face of society, and what amazing destinies bore that fragile vessel to which he trusted himself! It is true, this grand revolution has not all been to our advantage, still less to that of the peoples to whom it has given us access. But Columbus put

in the New World only greedy conquerors; and you are proceeding towards the peoples of the South only as pacifiers and friends. The cruel adventurers of Spain brought only destruction before them, and you will spread only good deeds. They served but the passions of a few men, and you aspire only to the good of all, to the glory of being of use! This glory, the sweetest, the truest, or rather the only true glory, awaits you, encompasses you already; you will know all its brilliance on that day of triumph and joy on which, returning to your country, welcomed amid our delight, you will arrive in our walls, loaded with the most precious spoils, and bearers of happy tidings of our brothers scattered in the uttermost confines of the Universe.

#### NOTE

- 1 It is unnecessary to give warning that the critical reflections that we are making on the accounts of explorers are levelled at the usual run of these accounts, and consequently admit notable exceptions. Far be it from us to wish a lessening of the admiration due to men like Cook, Bougainville and others. In this respect, you will have preceded us: it has been your first concern to study their writings.