

WHY I CHOSE THIS READING ASSIGNMENT

- 1) It gives a view by a European on native South American practices, so it's an early anthropological text.
- 2) It has a rebound effect whereby the European thinker questions European practices on the basis of this encounter. So it's not just judging the Americans on the basis of Europe but judging Europe on the basis of the Americans.
- 3) It also contains an account of an American's impressions of Europe, so it's a "reverse anthropology" text as well.
- 4) The story told about the practice of war by the Americans is very interesting; it forms part of the "noble savage" tradition of European thought.
- 5) It introduces us to the notion of skepticism, to which we now turn.

SKEPTICISM

- 1) Montaigne has a mild, humanist, skepticism; due to our human nature as social creatures we tend to believe things too easily and we should improve our critical reason before we render a judgment. In "Of Cannibals" there are two targets for this position:
 - a. We have a tendency to uncritically accept the reports of others who might embellish things, so we should be aware of the presuppositions of the reporter and adjust our belief in the story accordingly.
 - i. This comes out in the discussion of the simple reporter vs the sophisticated reporter.
 - ii. The former is more believable than the latter
 - iii. Since the latter has a tendency to embellish
 - b. We have a tendency to assume that our culture represents the pinnacle of human achievement so that differences from that culture are signs of deviation from the best ways. So we need to question our own culture on the basis of reports of other cultural practices.
 - i. This is illustrated by the story of the Greek general, who remarks upon seeing the awesome discipline of the Roman army:
 - ii. "Hey, everyone says non-Greeks are barbarians, but wow, look at that opposing army!"
 - iii. See also this line, introducing the report on Brazil: "every one gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country."
- 2) We will see two other skeptical philosophers in our course.
 - a. Descartes will use a radical doubt to reach absolute certainty. Anything that can be doubted in the slightest will be excluded from the search for a basis for knowledge.
 - b. Hume will think that we anticipate more than we can actually prove: because we want to believe something, we will think we see things that we don't actually see.

THE QUESTION OF THE "PRIMITIVE"

- 1) "Primitive" doesn't always mean "bad"; this is the joint theme of the noble savage and the decadence of civilization: the past was simple and in touch with nature, while the present is sophisticated and artificial, perhaps even corrupt and decadent
- 2) "These nations that seem to me to be so far barbarous, as having received but very little form and fashion from art and human invention, and consequently to be not much remote from their original simplicity"
- 3) Time for a little current (radical) anthropological thinking:
 - a. Non-state societies are not "simpler" than state societies; even if they are not centralized and hierarchical, do not have writing and record keeping, etc.
 - b. All human societies have complex symbolic, kinship, and decision-making patterns that relate the society to their eco-social niche; it's just that in some of them, the patterns preclude state formation.

THE DESCRIPTION OF BRAZILIAN SOCIETY

- 1) The society described by Montaigne, via his informant, is a sedentary society with communal living in "longhouses." They get their food through hunting and from "roots" which could be gathered from the wild or more likely harvested from cultivated plots.
- 2) They share the production, so that there is little inequality; they don't pass down private property in inheritance either.
- 3) They don't store their goods, but have feasts; drinking, dancing, singing.
- 4) They don't have a civilian power center, but they do have leaders in warfare.
- 5) This egalitarianism is illustrated by the two anecdotes at the end of the essay. A Brazilian visitor is asked his impressions of Europe:
 - a. Not having a sense of hereditary power (nepotism), he wonders why the adult men would take commands from a child (the young king), rather than choose a leader from within their own ranks (on the basis of valor in warfare).
 - i. There's an important difference between "lead" and "command" that Montaigne elides
 - ii. A war leader leads by example of his valor, but only on the battlefield; he doesn't "command" in non-war situations, or really even on the battlefield, where he leads
 - iii. A king commands by basis of his position, and he commands in war and peace alike
 - b. Being used to communal production and sharing, the American visitor doesn't understand private property that allows great inequality.
- 6) The sexual economy of the Brazilians is such that valor in warfare leads to more wives. As the present wives are mindful of their husband's honor, and as honor is gained by valor in warfare, they want their husband to have more wives as befitting a great man.
 - a. There is a very controversial thesis about this phenomenon put forth by an American anthropologist named Napoleon Chagnon. He claims that men known as killers in a particular tribe in contemporary Brazil have more children than those known as non-killers. This shows that male aggression can be explained on a genetic basis; the aggressiveness genes have been selected for.
 - b. Chagnon's critics dispute many points of his theory.

- i. Chagnon didn't account for the age of the killers: most of them were in their 40s and the non-killers were in their 20s, and it's obvious that men in their 40s are going to have more kids than men in their 20s. So it's the age that's the explanation, not the status as killer.
- ii. Most of the killers were also "headmen," who have more wives / more kids whether war was prevalent in their generation or not. But Chagnon didn't take that into account, the critics charge.
- iii. Chagnon only included the living killers in his calculation, but that if he had included those killed in warfare the supposed advantage vanishes.
- c. Chagnon and his supporters have replied to each of those criticisms.
- d. We're not in an anthropology course, so the takeaway is that the thesis of genetic selection of male aggressiveness has been made, disputed, and defended.

THE BRAZILIAN WAY OF WAR

- 1) War is for the display of valor, not for conquest of territory or acquisition of slaves. (There's no agriculture and storage of surplus so slaves can't be put to work to accumulate surplus; they are just another mouth to feed.)
- 2) Being captured in war sets up a contest of valor, whereby the captor tries to frighten the captor into displaying cowardice.
- 3) There's no torture of the captives described, just trash-talking; the captives reply with trash-talk of their own, including this great example: "when you eat my corpse, you'll be eating muscles grown big by feasting on your daddy and grand-daddy!"
- 4) Montaigne is very careful to note that the cannibalism is purely symbolic, and not utilitarian, that is, for nourishment.

THE COMPARISON OF BRAZILIAN AND EUROPEAN CUSTOMS

- 1) The Portuguese torture their prisoners while Brazilian didn't at first contact, though the natives began to copy the torture practice from the Europeans.
- 2) Why is it, Montaigne asks, that we so clearly see the barbarity of cannibalism, but don't see the horror of European torture?
- 3) If Europeans compare Brazilians to rules of reason, sure, they are barbarians, but Europeans can't call them barbarians if they compare them to Europeans, who are much worse. Beside the question of torture, Brazilian war is for valor, while European war is for conquest of land and enslavement of people.