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ORIGINAL PAPER

Imagining the Savage: Alterity and the Human Condition in Lahontan

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Abstract
Freedom and happiness occupy a central place in Lahontan's representations of Indigenous life, offering an alternative perspective on the institutions and values of European civilization. This study examines how personal autonomy, communal solidarity, social equality, and independence from material wealth contribute to the construction of the free and happy "savage". In Lahontan's writings, these qualities challenge the assumption that political authority, private property, economic prosperity, and social prestige are necessary conditions of a fulfilling human existence. The confrontation between Adario and his French interlocutor, however, reveals a deeper difficulty: different ways of life are evaluated through culturally specific expectations concerning comfort, ambition, dependence, and well-being. Neither perspective fully escapes the tendency to judge the Other according to its own values. Furthermore, the coexistence of egalitarian claims with practices of slavery exposes the limits of the freedom attributed to Indigenous communities. The analysis argues that Lahontan's representations open alternative possibilities for understanding the human condition, while their selective and sometimes contradictory character prevents the idealization of Indigenous life from becoming an unquestionable model of human happiness.

Keywords: *Lahontan; savage, alterity, freedom; happiness; social equality; human condition*.

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Introduction

The encounter with Native American populations posed a challenge to European thought, which was now confronted with ways of life that were different and difficult to understand. The criteria familiar to European civilization no longer served to explain the behavior of certain populations, who—due to cultural differences—appeared to be savages. Observing differences in social organization, beliefs, and behavior, Europeans constructed representations in which the "savage" appears either as an expression of an inferior humanity or as the embodiment of traits that Europeans themselves seemed to have lost. Thus, an imaginary world emerges in which the "savage" plays an ambivalent role—that of an inferior being or a model of humanity to which Europeans relate nostalgically. In any of the representations constructed around him, the "savage" becomes a figure of alterity. The imaginary can be understood here as an attempt to comprehend a different existence. The "savage" thus becomes a figure through which the European can examine his own values, institutions, and perceptions of himself. Furthermore, we could say that through this relationship with the other, the European has the opportunity to reconsider the way he understands humanity and the human condition. The encounter with the "savage" thus also becomes an anthropological challenge. However, the question arises: to what extent does valuing the other contribute to understanding him, or does it rather transform him into a model that expresses the expectations of the one who represents him?

I will approach these issues starting with the writings of Baron de Lahontan, in which we find various representations of Native American populations. In works such as *Nouveaux voyages*, *Mémoires de l'Amérique septentrionale*, and *Dialogues*, he describes everyday practices, recounts conversations, and reports on encounters with "savage" interlocutors (Lahontan, 1990, vols. 1–2). I will treat these writings as hermeneutic material from which we can trace some characteristics of the "savage," treated as a figure of the imaginary and an expression of alterity. Lahontan's writings do not present a homogeneous portrait. At times, the author admires the intelligence, freedom, and communal solidarity of those he describes; at other times, he distances himself from them by judging their beliefs and behaviors. In *Dialogues*, we encounter the figure of Adario, the savage who critically questions European institutions and is capable of challenging the arguments of the representative of a civilization considered superior (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2). However, since this is a literary character rather than a real person, we recognize here the author's voice rather than the result of an encounter between representatives of the two cultures.

Lahontan depicts the savage as rational, free, and happy (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2). Based on these images, identifying humanity with the model of European civilization becomes problematic. I will examine these representations, also taking into account an anthropological question: how can we reconsider our own human condition through an encounter with a different way of life? What happens to the definition of humanity when rationality and moral judgment are acknowledged in those considered uncivilized? To what extent can freedom and happiness be understood independently of the institutions, values, and aspirations of European society? At the same time, the question arises regarding the limits of the representation: does recognizing admirable qualities in the other also imply the understanding of their particular way of life?

The starting point is that the images of the "savage" constructed by Lahontan reveal to us other possibilities of thinking, of organizing communal life, and of appreciating existence, thereby challenging the universal nature of European criteria of humanity. The

"savage" is no longer solely the object of judgments formulated from the perspective of civilization; rather, he becomes an interlocutor capable of judging the European world in his turn. This perspective does not automatically eliminate stereotypes associated with the "other." The traits attributed to the "other" are selected and valued through a framework that remains dependent on our own cultural standards. European superiority becomes questionable when viewed through these representations of the "savage." But at the same time, there is a risk of reducing the "other's" distinctive characteristics to the image of an exemplary existence.

In this article, I will analyze the construction of the image of the savage in Lahontan's work in relation to the organization of social relations and the criteria for a fulfilling life. The savage is portrayed as free and happy, in contrast to the civilized European. I will identify how these images function in Lahontan's writings and some of the anthropological implications they reveal (Lahontan, 1990, vols. 1–2). From this perspective, the figure of the savage allows us to examine the relationship between the representation of alterity and the understanding of our own human condition, without one necessarily guaranteeing the realization of the other.

1. Freedom as independence and self-control

Freedom is one of the characteristics through which Lahontan portrays the savage and distinguishes him from the civilized European. In savages, he observes a lack of subordination to a sovereign, communal solidarity, and independence from the accumulation of possessions. All of these elements construct the image of an existence that relates differently to the individual and society. Lahontan admires the savage for his ability to freely dispose of himself and for the fact that he can participate in community life without the constraints typical to European institutions. Social life is no longer identified with hierarchy, coercive authority, and individual property. In this sense, the portrayal of the savage gains an anthropological dimension. What emerges here is the image of the happy savage, whose existence is fulfilled and who seeks peace of mind, which he attains through his autonomy from desires fueled by wealth and prestige. Freedom and happiness are mutually supportive; the former concerns the way in which relationships between people are organized, while the latter shows us how a life can be considered fulfilled.

In *Nouveaux voyages*, the freedom of the savage is expressed through the speech of La Grangula, the Iroquois leader who responds to Governor de La Barre's demands. Faced with an authority that claims the right to control the alliances and trade relations of Native American communities, La Grangula asserts: "We were born free; we depend on neither Onnontio nor Corlar" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 1: 308)[2]. He then claims the freedom of movement, the freedom to maintain relations with other populations, and the freedom to buy or sell according to their own interests. The Iroquois leader thus rejects his community's dependence on French authorities, asserting their own decision-making capacity.

Here we encounter a concrete manifestation of freedom, not an abstract attribute of natural man. Freedom manifests itself through the rejection of foreign authority and through the assertion of the community's right to determine its own relationships with others. La Grangula observes a contrast in the Europeans' attitude: on the one hand, they

[2] „Nous sommes nez libres, nous ne dépendons d'Onnontio non plus que de Corlar" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 1: 308).

claim to value freedom of action and decision-making; on the other, they attempt to impose restrictions on the Native American populations. The leader invokes the possibility of maintaining trade relations with the English under the same conditions under which other communities maintain relations with the French. Furthermore, he reproaches the French and the English for occupying territories to which they had no rights (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 1: 309). We observe here that European authority is subject to critical scrutiny: what the colonizer presents as the legitimate exercise of power is interpreted by the other as an unjustified attempt at subjugation.

This claim for freedom takes place within a well-defined context. At Grangula, he speaks on behalf of communities engaged in military conflicts and alliances, each with their own political and commercial interests. Through his speech, the Iroquois leader challenges the claim of an authority to control other communities without their consent. Thus, the "savage" possesses a political will of his own, being capable of rejecting the position of dependence within which the European seeks to place him.

In *Dialogues*, freedom is represented by the contrast between the Huron's autonomy and the European's subordination. Discussing laws and authority, Adario states: "We were born free and are united as brothers, each as much a master as the others" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 831)[3]. Freedom is associated here with equality among the members of the community, without ruling out the existence of a leader. Adario particularly challenges the possibility that one person might arbitrarily dispose of another's existence. The contrast with the European model is taken further. While the Frenchman is dependent on the king, governors, and those who hold public office, he, the Huron, defines himself by personal autonomy: "I am master of my own body, I have control over myself, and I do as I please" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 831)[4].

What we see here is a more general conception of freedom than that concerning the relationship between states. To be the master of yourself means not living under the constant threat of an authority that can interfere with your very existence. For Adario, freedom entails the ability to act without fear and without depending on the will of those in a position of authority. In contrast, the Frenchman accepts relationships of subordination that he considers necessary for social order. We are witnessing a reversal of the relationship: the savage, who lacks the institutions of civilization, claims an autonomy that is denied to those who are supposedly protected by these institutions. Moreover, the institutions of civilization seem incapable of granting equal autonomy to those living under their authority.

The autonomy of the savage is also represented through its relationship to laws and social order. In "Des Loix," Lahontan defends the necessity of laws based on their function of protecting society against violence, theft, and injustice. He believes that punishments are necessary precisely because people do not always abide by the rules of just coexistence (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 830–832). Adario challenges the effectiveness of these institutions and points to the injustices committed in the very name of the law. We are dealing with two different ways of understanding the relation between individual freedom and the conditions of collective life. For the French philosopher, the law protects us against the arbitrary conduct of others; for Adario, it is precisely the need for coercion that

[3] „Nous sommes nez libres & frères unis, aussi grands Maîtres les uns que les autres" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 831).
[4] „Je suis maître de mon corps, je dispose de moy-même, je fais ce que je veux" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 831).

demonstrates the difficulty people have in living together without causing each other harm (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 832).

The image of the free savage challenges the idea that coercive authority is a necessary condition for any form of social organization. Adario does not argue that such authority is impossible or entirely useless. He does, however, argue for the existence of a community in which relationships between people can be organized according to rules other than those of French society. The institutions through which the latter organizes its existence can no longer be considered, without justification, universal forms of human life.

2. Property, solidarity, and dependence

In *Mémoires de l'Amérique septentrionale*, a community is imagined in terms of solidarity that limits the importance of individual possession. Lahontan states: "The Savages know neither 'yours' nor 'mine,' for one may say that what belongs to one belongs to another." (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 1: 637)[5]. More specifically, this refers to the support given to someone who has failed to return from a hunt or who has lost a tool necessary for survival. Goods circulate among community members according to need, without those providing support having any contractual obligation. Solidarity thus emerges as a common practice of communal life (Ghenea, 2014a).

The expression *ni tien, ni mien* does not necessarily describe property relations in Native American societies. That certain organization of communal relations contrasts with European patrimonial individualism (Răduică, 2023). The examples he provides refer primarily to mutual aid, the use of goods, and the willingness to meet the needs of others. This image is significant in that it associates freedom with solidarity. Autonomy, therefore, does not imply separation from the community (Ghenea, 2014b). The "savage" is portrayed as a person whose independence can coexist with relationships of mutual support. In this portrayal, individual freedom does not imply constant competition for goods nor the strict demarcation of personal interests.

The question that arises is from what perspective these reports are appreciated at the community level. Georges E. Sioui argues that the representations of liberty, equality, and solidarity in Lahontan's writings express values characteristic of Native American thought, which the European author was able to understand thanks to his direct contact with indigenous communities (Sioui, 1992: 71–73). From this perspective, the critique of property and personal subordination cannot be reduced to a literary device intended to denounce the injustices of French society. Sioui's perspective allows us to reconsider the relation between the critical function of the image and the social experience that it represents. Robert Twiss accepts the possibility that the arguments attributed to Adario may have originated, at least in part, from Lahontan's encounters with Native American interlocutors (Twiss, 2024: 10–12). However, the recognition of certain communal values does not justify their unconditional extension to all Native American populations or to all social relationships within a community. This distinction becomes particularly necessary when the image of equality is confronted with the existence of forms of personal dependence.

This image of solidarity is accompanied by an emphasis on equality. Lahontan attributes to Native Americans the belief that members of the community are equally masters of their own existence, since people share the same origin and there is no natural

[5] „Les Sauvages ne connoissent ni tien, ni mien, car on peut dire que ce qui est à l'un est à l'autre" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 1: 637).

basis for the subordination of some to others (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 1: 639). French society appears to be characterized by differences in rank and wealth, and an individual's prestige depends largely on his or her social position. The "savage" is portrayed as a person who does not judge his peers solely by the goods they possess or the positions they hold.

This absence of personal subordination does not imply the absence of any form of collective organization. Lahontan describes how deliberations take place in the councils of elders, how decisions regarding the community's interests are made, and the role played by the orators who communicate the outcome of these deliberations (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 1: 640–641). We are thus speaking of the existence of rules, responsibilities, and forms of authority that are recognized by the participants. The difference from European organization lies primarily in the way authority is exercised and justified, and in its relationship to the autonomy of the community's members. Consequently, the image of the free savage cannot be reduced to that of a person living without any constraints. He is part of a social organization that relates differently to authority and freedom than French society does.

The representation of freedom can also be understood through the way in which the savage relates to material interests. In *Mémoires*, Lahontan notes that the savages call money "le Serpent des François" and associate it with theft, rivalry, and betrayal. Money corrupts relationships between people (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 1: 638). The image of the serpent suggests a power that penetrates social life and alters its rules, such that the acquisition of goods becomes a dominant need. In "Du bonheur," Adario takes up this critique, calling money "le démon des démons, le Tiran des Français" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 850). Through its association with the term "Tyrant," money takes on the connotation of coercion attributed to political authority. Europeans can become dependent on their own material aspirations even when they are not under any immediate external coercion.

The critique of money goes beyond the simple organization of the economy. In his speech, Adario argues that material interest influences the assessment of people's worth, the distribution of prestige, and the relationships among members of society. The rich acquire a privileged position, while the poor end up dependent and humiliated (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 850). Human relationships are affected by the accumulation of wealth, as people draw closer to or distance themselves from one another depending on the benefits they can obtain. The image of the free savage also implies the absence of such dependencies. Freedom presupposes the possibility of living without one's personal worth or relationships with others being determined by wealth and an interest in material goods. This criticism does not lead to a rejection of economic exchange. As we have seen, La Grangula asserts the right to buy and sell as an expression of his community's freedom. What is contested is not economic exchange as such, but the role that material interest and the desire for enrichment play in altering social relations and creating unnatural hierarchies that lead to personal subordination. We cannot, therefore, attribute to the "savage" the image of absolute self-sufficiency.

3. Freedom in family relationships: choice and authority

Freedom is also reflected in family relationships. In the dialogue "Sur le mariage," Adario discusses his daughter's desire to marry a young man whom he does not consider suitable. Nevertheless, he admits that the decision is hers: "She wants it; that is enough

among us" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 876)[6]. The character then discusses the possible objections his daughter might raise if he were to try to impose another husband on her. Parental authority is challenged by the individual's right to decide on their own existence, and marriage cannot be justified solely by the interests or preferences of the family.

The meaning of freedom extends beyond political relationships. Autonomy also emerges within family relationships, in contrast to an authority based on age or family status. We cannot, however, affirm the existence of full equality between women and men. The representations of family relationships in the *Dialogues* also contain generalizing or derogatory assessments (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2). What is relevant here is that freedom is also associated with the possibility of personal choice, which does not imply the absence of any constraints in the family life of the Huron community.

4. The limits of equality: freedom and slavery

The limits of freedom and equality are highlighted by the existence of slavery. Even when describing the community's solidarity in *Mémoires*, Lahontan notes that people who have lost family members may receive slaves (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 1: 637–638). In *Dialogues*, after defending equality and criticizing the relationships of subordination in French society, Adario makes the following remark: "Here comes my slave to tell me that they are waiting for me in the village" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 848)[7]. The character accepts the labor of slaves and the benefits of their capture. This contradiction limits the image of freedom attributed to the savage. Equality is affirmed among members of the community, but it is not recognized for all individuals in relation to it. The image of collective and individual freedom coexists with practices of domination that are not subject to the same criticism. Réal Ouellet interprets the contradiction between the demand for equality and the acceptance of slavery as an indication of Lahontan's ironic distancing from Adario (Ouellet, 1995: 333). We observe that at times the author tends to problematize even the discourse of the character through which he criticizes European society. It remains to be seen whether or not this contradiction represents an ironic intention. However, what remains clear is that we cannot transform the free savage into a symbol of universal human equality. The character accepts slave labor and the benefits of enslaving others. This contradiction limits the image of freedom attributed to the savage. Equality is affirmed among members of the community, but it is not recognized for all individuals who have a relationship with it. The image of collective and individual freedom coexists with practices of domination that are not subject to the same criticism. Réal Ouellet interprets the contradiction between the demand for equality and the acceptance of slavery as an indication of Lahontan's ironic distancing from Adario (Ouellet, 1995: 333). We observe that at times the author tends to problematize even the discourse of the character through which he criticizes European society. It remains to be seen whether or not this contradiction represents an ironic intention. However, what we take away from this is that we cannot transform the free savage into a figure of universal human equality. His portrayal challenges the necessary nature of European-specific subordination, but it does not offer a social model in which relationships of dependence are absent.

[6] „Elle le veut, cela suffit parmi nous" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 876).
[7] „Voilà mon Esclave qui vient m'avertir qu'on m'attend au Village" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 848).

5. Happiness and the multiple ways of life

Freedom is the foundation of the savage's happiness, according to Lahontan. In his *Mémoires*, he asserts that Native Americans value peace of mind more than material wealth and consider the ability to live without turmoil to be worth more than the vast knowledge of civilization (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 1: 639). Furthermore, in "Du bonheur," Adario challenges the notion that a fulfilling life is synonymous with wealth, comfort, and prestige. In his portrayal of the happy savage, the latter is not interested in accumulating material goods and is not dependent on the recognition of those above him in the social hierarchy (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2).

However, the happiness of the savage cannot be understood solely in terms of his autonomy from authority or economic interests. The question arises: by what criteria can we consider someone's life to be happy? And to what extent can these criteria be applied to the lives of those whose needs and aspirations differ from our own?

When Lahontan presents the privileges of the wealthy as evidence of the superiority of European life, he describes the luxurious homes, carriages, gardens, entertainments, and comforts of the French aristocracy, asking whether there can be a more pleasant life than that of people who lack for nothing (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 855). Adario rejects this notion of superiority, arguing that material advantages do not guarantee happiness. Behind wealth and rank, in his view, lie rivalry, fear of losing royal favor, envy, and constant turmoil (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 855).

In contrast to the European way of life, the savage prefers a simple existence and inner autonomy. Adario prefers "to be a Huron, with my body bare and my soul at peace" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 856)[8]. Nudity is presented as the opposite of luxury and wealth and symbolizes a simple lifestyle free from obligations. At the same time, peace of mind cannot be secured by material possessions. Where the European sees deprivation and poverty, the savage sees freedom. Free from the obsession with getting rich, the savage is liberated from the need to impress others in order to maintain his social status.

This is not merely a matter of the contrast between poverty and wealth. Adario challenges the notion that material possessions can determine the value of a life (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 856). A man may enjoy comfort and prestige without being satisfied with his life, just as the absence of luxury does not necessarily imply suffering. Happiness is linked to the way we live our lives without being dominated by aspirations that constantly cause us turmoil. In this view, freedom from social constraints goes hand in hand with the ability to appreciate what we already have in our own lives.

The dialogue is not limited to the contrast between the happy savage and the European who is incapable of acknowledging his own unhappiness. Lahontan asserts that people raised in an environment of ambition and competition come to find satisfaction precisely in these pursuits and argues that "happiness exists only in the imagination" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 857)[9]. Furthermore, he argues that the constant desire to acquire something new gives value to existence, since the absence of aspirations would turn life into a monotonous succession of already familiar pleasures. This argument introduces a new criterion for assessing happiness. If happiness depends on imagination, habit, and what a person desires, material conditions cannot be evaluated independently of the meaning they acquire for the person experiencing them. Ambition, which Adario considers a source of suffering, may be interpreted by his interlocutor as a prerequisite for

[8] „estre Huron, avoir le Corps nû, & l'ame tranquille" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 856).
[9] „le bonheur ne consiste que dans l'imagination" (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 857).

an interesting life. Conversely, the Huron's tranquility, which Adario sees as spiritual fulfillment, appears to the Frenchman as a lack of aspiration. Each judges the other's existence based on his own criteria, and the difference cannot be explained solely by the possession of material goods or their absence.

In his discussion of the concrete conditions of life in the wild, Lahontan lists the lack of comfort, the difficulties of hunting, and the dangers of travel and war, considering them incompatible with happiness (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 852). Adario responds that these activities are familiar to the Hurons and that some of them are even sources of satisfaction. He asks what essential difference there is between sleeping in a hut and sleeping in a palace, if both provide the necessary conditions for rest. Similarly, food that a European might consider meager may adequately satisfy the needs of the Huron (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 853–854).

The difference between the two perspectives lies in the relationship between experience and the assessment of existence. For the Frenchman, the hardships of life in the wilderness constitute deprivations because they are judged in comparison with his own habits. For Adario, European comfort can become a burden, and activities considered exhausting can be experienced as forms of freedom and satisfaction. This does not mean that the same material conditions are necessarily pleasant or unpleasant, but rather that their meaning also depends on the habits, expectations, and values of the person experiencing them. The way people value their lives is inseparable from the way they have learned to live them.

From this perspective, the dialogue on happiness allows us to identify an anthropological implication. What is considered necessary, bearable, or desirable may vary depending on the concrete forms of existence. People do not evaluate their lives solely based on the material conditions in which they live, but also on the meaning they attribute to those conditions. The difference between their lives concerns both the organization of daily activities and the criteria by which they are evaluated.

In the end, the two interlocutors fail to reach an agreement regarding the criteria for happiness (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2). Adario continues to interpret European ambition as a form of suffering, while Lahontan considers the Huron's tranquility incompatible with the aspirations of a man raised in French society. We observe that, although each can describe the other's life, they continue to evaluate it from within their own way of life. Moreover, neither of them would accept changing their own way of life. Lahontan rejects the invitation to become a Huron, considering it impossible for a Frenchman to get used to the diet, clothing, activities, and customs of a Native American community (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 858). Adario replies that the difficulties cited result largely from habit (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 859–860). In contrast, when assessing the possibility of becoming French himself, Adario invokes obstacles that he considers incompatible with his values: submission to authority, social conventions, tolerance of injustice, and dependence on rank or wealth (Lahontan, 1990, vol. 2: 860–861).

Susan Pinette interprets this confrontation as a rejection of the model of cultural conversion, noting that each interlocutor ultimately refuses the possibility of adopting the other's way of life. This interpretation prevents us from treating the Huron community as an ideal that Europeans could reclaim simply by renouncing civilization (Pinette, 2006: 47). However, it does not follow from the dialogue between the two that cultural change is impossible. Adario argues that the Frenchman's habits can be altered, and his refusal to become French reflects his rejection of certain practices he considers unjust. Resistance

to change thus consists of both habits and values, which each of them believes they cannot abandon without fundamentally altering their existence.

We could say that, since certain habits can be changed, the criteria for a good life are not entirely independent of experience. But even the willingness to adopt new behaviors does not imply acceptance of the values that accompany them. The European and the Huron are not merely discussing the possibility of sleeping in a cabin, giving up certain foods, or changing their clothing. They raise deeper questions about how they understand authority, dependence, prestige, and freedom. Precisely for this reason, the refusal to engage in cultural transformation cannot be explained solely by the difficulty of material adaptation.

6. Between the experience of alterity and idealization

The question still remains: how does Lahontan's image of the "savage" help us understand alterity? David Allen Harvey observes that Lahontan's admiration for the freedom of Native Americans can be linked to his own dissatisfaction with social hierarchies, absolutism, and institutional constraints (Harvey, 2010: 181). In other words, Lahontan's account is not a neutral description of Native American life. We can therefore highlight the selective nature of the representation of the "other": certain characteristics of the "savage" become particularly valuable because they address the difficulties that Europeans identify in their own existence.

Jean-Marie Apostolidès interprets the image of Native American freedom in relation to a nostalgia for an aristocratic independence lost in the process of consolidating monarchical authority. Solidarity, equality among community members, and the absence of dependence on a sovereign would, in this reading, express a social ideal linked to Lahontan's position in French society (Apostolidès, 1986: 76–79). This interpretation explains why certain characteristics of the savage take on such powerful meaning in the critique of European civilization. However, it does not demonstrate that these values were merely projections of the author, with no counterpart in the lives of Native American communities. The difficulty of representing the "other" becomes clearer: the recognized traits of the "savage" may indeed belong to his experience, but they may also correspond, at the same time, to the author's own beliefs.

The image of Huron happiness can thus serve as an alternative through which European life is reexamined. But it is precisely this reevaluation that risks emphasizing the traits that reinforce the opposition between the two ways of life. Adario presents his community as being almost entirely free of rivalries, conflicts, and divergent interests, while French society is characterized by ambition, envy, and dependence. The contrast between an exemplary community and one dominated by corruption is highlighted, but individual experiences that do not fit these general characterizations are ignored. For his part, Lahontan evaluates the Huron's way of life based on the criteria of comfort, wealth, and the variety of pleasures. He may concede that the savage finds satisfaction in his own life, but he continues to regard this satisfaction as inferior to that offered by European civilization. Thus, both interlocutors encounter difficulties when attempting to understand a different way of life without reducing it to their own criteria. The dialogue highlights the plurality of ways to appreciate life, but does not lead to a reconciliation of perspectives.

The images of the free and happy savage raise questions about the validity of the forms of organization and valuation of existence that Europeans take for granted. Through these images, the relationships of authority, property, and dependence, as well as the criteria of wealth and prestige, cease to serve as sufficient criteria for assessing the human

condition. The savage represents the possibility of an existence organized according to different rules and valued by different standards. This possibility, however, does not amount to asserting the universal superiority of Huron life, nor does it imply the equal recognition of all ways of life. Each perspective remains tied to the customs and values through which we interpret our own existence.

Conclusions

The way Lahontan imagines the "savage" brings into question the possibility of identifying humanity with the characteristics and values of European civilization. The ability to reason, to make moral judgments, to organize communal life, and to aspire to happiness appears in the representations of ways of life that do not follow the European model. Cultural difference thus becomes an opportunity to question the human condition: to what extent does what a society considers natural, necessary, or valuable express universal human qualities?

The image of the free and happy savage offers us a different perspective on European existence. The savage can judge the institutions and mores of a civilization that claims to define and evaluate him. Freedom and happiness can no longer be assessed solely in relation to political authority, property, wealth, or comfort. The criteria by which Europeans understand their own condition are confronted with the possibility of different ways of organizing and valuing human life. A reconsideration of humanity begins when these criteria lose their seemingly universal character and become themselves the objects of reflection.

We cannot conclude from this that the savage's perspective represents a higher truth, free from prejudice. Lahontan's characters challenge European generalizations, but they, in turn, make sweeping judgments about their own communities and about French society. Freedom and happiness are attributed to selectively presented ways of life, and one's appreciation of another's life often remains dependent on the habits and values of the person judging it. Difference can be acknowledged without being fully understood. Even when the other becomes an admirable model, the portrayal of that person may continue to reflect the expectations and concerns of the one describing him.

The constructed character of these images does not undermine their anthropological relevance. They should not be treated either as transparent depictions of Native American societies or as mere European projections devoid of any connection to the experience of alterity. Their critical power derives precisely from the confrontation between the representation of a different way of life and the certainties through which Europeans justify their own way of life. In this confrontation, the "other" becomes a potential interlocutor, even if the discourse attributed to him remains mediated by the author's perspective.

Thus, imagining the savage can open up a possibility for reconsidering the human condition itself, without guaranteeing that the limits of representation will be transcended. Recognizing the freedom and happiness of the other challenges the assumption of European superiority, but does not necessarily equate to accepting that otherness. It is precisely this gap between appreciation and understanding that constitutes the philosophical problem made visible by the way Lahontan imagines the savage. His images allow us to ask both what we can discover about our own humanity through an encounter with a different existence, and to what extent we are capable of understanding it without transforming it into an expression of our own ideals.

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