

9. Three Danish Texts of the 1760s by P. F. Suhm, T. E. F. von Finecke and Jens Kraft

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This essay deals with three works that were published in Denmark during the 1760s. I have chosen these works because I think they tell us much about Danish intellectual life at the time and about Danish engagement with contemporary European work and scholarship on the subjects chosen by the three authors. At the end are two appendices. The first is a translation of some important pages in Kraft's *Kort Fortællning*; the second is on the authorship of the treatise *Systema mundi*, which has generally been attributed to Kraft.

I

It was P. F. Suhm's plan to write a history of the Danish people from the earliest times until about 1450, but as a preparation for the task he saw the need first to determine the origin of all nations in order, thereby, to support his claim that the Celtic and northern nations had separate origins because they descended from different sons of Japhet, the third son of Noah who was held to be the ancestor of the western and northern nations—hence the term japhetic for the languages that are now called Indo-European. This theme of separation is prominent in the book Suhm published in 1769 to lay the groundwork for his history. In translation the title reads: 'An Essay toward a Plan for a History of the Origin of Nations in general, as an Introduction to the Origin of the Northern Nations in particular.'⁴²⁸ The title is not surprising. It proclaims the well-known effort to place one's own nation within the multiplicity of peoples that came to settle and inhabit the earth in the dispersal that followed the confusion at Babel. But the work itself is surprising, for, given its date, it is thoroughly antiquarian, even though the bibliography of some 250 items, with which the volume opens, lists a few works from the 1760s.

On the first page Suhm declares that Moses in the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) presents us with our only source of certain knowledge “about the first settlement of the earth and the origin of nations,” knowledge that is supplemented by “other biblical writers who are nearly all older than the pagan writings and never conflict with the authority of Moses.” This supreme history makes it possible for us to make sense of the conflicting accounts of early classical authors who did not have the benefit of Moses, such as Homer, Herodotus, and Thucydides. Indeed we will learn that whatever may be true in these authors will be found to agree with Moses, or at least not to be incompatible with him (1–2, 7–8). Thus the Bible is Suhm’s first text, and it is cited throughout more than any other source.⁴²⁹ In addition Suhm cites a very large number of classical authors who, by their agreement with Moses, unwittingly testify to the providential order of history. Among recent sources the most important is James Ussher’s Mosaic chronology which dates events from the year of creation in 4004 BCE, thus placing the Flood at the year 1656 and the Confusion at 1767. Two other prominent sources are Samuel Bochart’s *Geographia sacra* and Richard Cumberland’s *Origines gentium antiquissimae*.⁴³⁰

Suhm has two organizing principles. One is the Mosaic chronology which is unproblematic, having been taken over ready-made from Ussher.⁴³¹ The other is the evidence of languages and names which is the ever-present occupation of the entire work. This evidence is governed by three solid rules: that common origin is shown by similarities of names among countries, nations, places, and persons (60); that languages show kinship and origin of nations, as well as the courses they have followed in their migrations (70); and that all languages are to be accounted for by their descent from “the generations of the sons of Noah” (71–76), detailed with an abundance of names in chapter ten of Genesis. At the time this use of languages had a long history that had recently been codified by Leibniz both in a programmatic essay which appeared in the first volume of the early Berlin Academy in 1710 and also in other writings, including his published correspondence. Suhm refers to a number of these texts, but he pays slight attention to—or simply ignores—Leibniz’s call for scholarly care and caution in the interpretation and uses of etymology.⁴³² Here again Suhm was doing what others, not least Bochart, had practiced in the works Leibniz cautioned against. Even in the late 1760s Suhm did not have mapped-out proce-

dures, but rather engaged in a sort of higgledy-piggledy bustle within his territory. Our approach must therefore be through examples.

As an example of the evidence of names Suhm cites the place name "Denia," which he says is found both in Persia and in Spain; but since the Spanish Denia is not mentioned in classical sources we can "with certainty conclude" that it must have come from Persia, since we also know that the "Arabians" who conquered Spain also for a long time ruled over Persia (60). On the same page this example is used to throw light on a more important matter. Both Danes and Saxons worship the god "Odin" or "Wodan." This similarity of names, says Suhm, suggests common origin, but it might also cause our "fear" that it has come about in neighborly intercourse and fellowship. The possibility of a common origin becomes stronger when we consider that Danes and the people of Dagestan (on the Russian steppes) both use "Odin" as a male name, and that the Danes and the "Czuwascher" have the same name "Thor" for a very powerful god. Suhm's reasoning is that, since these nations "lived far from each other and have done so for as long as memory reaches, and since history tells of no intercourse between them," then there must in the first ages of the world have been a solid cause for the similarity, and from this we must in turn conclude that these nations once lived together and that the Danes have migrated away toward the north while the rest had remained in place on the steppes.

Another typical case is Kittim, the third son of Javan, who was the fourth son of Japhet (Gen. 10.4; I Chron. 1.7). Javan was the ancestor of the Greeks, "as Scriptures say in plain words" (75), and, also in plain words, that Kittim or his offspring settled in Macedonia and Italy, where they arrived by crossing the sea. Since all this is reported by Moses, Italy must have been settled before his death in the year 2553 of Ussher's chronology (77). Later in the volume, Suhm devotes several more pages to Kittim and Italy, and it now turns out that the settlers who came across the sea can also be called Pelasgians, which was the name of a mythic population already mentioned by Homer (*Iliad* 2.480; 17.301), and also at greater length by Herodotus, both of whom are now cited along with Pliny, Strabo, several recent authorities, and of course Scriptures, in a characteristic effort to harmonize all sources into solid historical knowledge. In this story the Pelasgians deserve a moment's attention because they gain prominence in origin-narratives

as the ur-population of the Aegean world generally, that is, the area sometimes called Greater Greece, embracing the Aegean Sea with its islands and the bordering lands on all sides. Eventually Pelasgian became a name for the Greeks, and their settlements were claimed not only for distant parts of the Mediterranean but even for such far off places as North America.

But Suhm's chief concern was the problem he announced on the first page of his brief preface when he wrote that if the Celts descended from one of Japhet's sons, and if "their language, being different from ours, shows that they must have a different origin from us, then the people of the North must of necessity stem from another son of Japhet than the Celts." Suhm devoted two short chapters to each of Noah's sons Sem and Ham, but he gave nearly 200 pages (139–326, or slightly more than half the entire volume) to the descendants of Japhet. But to this long chapter he added still another (which is also the last) devoted to "Gomer the son of Japhet and his offspring" (327–356). Gomer himself could not have come so far north as to settle in Jutland, but Suhm finds a solution in the *Odyssey* where we read that Circe "reached the furthest parts of the deep-flowing River of Ocean where the Cimmerians live, wrapped in mist and fog. The bright Sun cannot look down on them with his rays, either when he climbs the starry heavens or when he turns back from heaven to earth again. Dreadful Night spreads her mantle over that unhappy people."⁴³³

It has been said that the home of the Cimmerians was in Italy, as Homer would seem to imply, but Suhm does not find that this fits well with the dark and misty lands where Homer says they lived, "nor of the lands north of the Black Sea, but rather fits the Danish Cimbri who lived in Jutland," as seems to be confirmed also by Tacitus and Strabo (327–330). This consideration facilitates the merging of the Cimmerians with the Cimbri. The original home of the former must have been in the region north and east of the Black Sea, as is suggested by the name of the Crimean peninsula (341). The conclusion follows that the Germans (or more correctly the Teutons, "de Tydske") and the northern nations have been one people whose ultimate ancestor was Japhet's first son Gomer, though we cannot tell which of Gomer's three sons was the nearer ancestor. This account is strengthened by the "similarity of sound among the names Gomer, Cimmerian, and Cimbri" (348–349), and by such authorities as Tacitus, Pausanias, and Caesar who all admit

that there was a great difference between the Celtic and the Germanic languages (351). By contrast, the Celts descended from Japhet's second son Magog through his second son Thiras.

Suhm's intricate argument achieves the desired separation of the northern nations from the Celts, but he reserves the final treatment of the northern nations for another volume (349). It is fair to recall that it is now generally accepted that the home of the Cimbri was in northern Jutland, but, needless to say, today the argument on that point follows a very different path than Suhm's combination of biblical readings with such distant classical texts as Homer and Herodotus.⁴³⁴

One cannot read Suhm's essay without admiring how freely he moves names and their bearers across the globe over great distances, how he links biblical names with names in classical sources, and now he manages, by his bold and daring comparisons, to make the harmonies and dissonances of names support the separation of the northern from the Celtic nations. Of course, much of this had been done before. He did not start from scratch, he had forebears, but they were old, all cast in a mold that had not changed for a good one hundred years. There is no inkling of anthropology or ethnology in his book, nothing about the role of rulers, of forms of government and institutions, of tyranny or despotism, or about cultural differences. There is no trace of Montesquieu and no awareness of the awesome fact that Richard Simon in his *Histoire critique du vieux Testament* (1678) had put an end to the authority of Moses.⁴³⁵

Still, there is one feature of Suhm's argument that stands out. First published in 1755 and again, much expanded, in 1763, Paul-Henri Mallet's *Introduction a l'histoire de Dannemarc* owed its quick European-wide success not least to Mallet's equation of northern and Celtic antiquities. Suhm must have been aware that Mallet's book owed its success to the explosive appeal of the poems of Ossian, in which case it would seem that Suhm's theme of separation was a deliberate move.

II

In 1767 a small volume, the size of a pamphlet, was published in French in Copenhagen. It contained two "dissertations," one on the origin of languages and another on runes.⁴³⁶ It is the former that concerns us

here. Its argument is that there was a single primitive and universal language that underlies all existing languages, and that this language was Hebrew, as attested by the presence of Hebrew forms in the languages of Asia, Europe, Africa, and America. Thus for Chinese, for example, “it is well known that the Jesuits have found evident remnants of Judaism and of Hebrew names in some provinces of China” (19).⁴³⁷ This was a familiar doctrine, but it had recently been set aside by the claim that no language, including Hebrew, had survived the Confusion at Babel, thus prompting the need for a fresh account of the origin of language. This “recent doctrine,” as the author calls it, held that language had a gestural origin in movements of the body and in natural cries, that is, in the union of expression and communication. The author rejects this doctrine in favor of Hebrew, but in the course of doing so he gives an informed account of the recent theory. This account occupies more than half the dissertation’s twenty pages, and it is this part that is interesting.

As the proponents of this theory, the author cites several names that had appeared in the recent literature on the subject, including some Church Fathers along with Locke, William Warburton, Condillac, and some other recent figures, “both ecclesiastic and lay who have been pleased to propose ingenious conjectures on this pretended origin of language” (5). He gives this account of what they propose:

We can, they say, look at the first people as being mute, speaking to the eyes by exhibiting a variety of objects (f), and as people who could communicate their thoughts only by gestures, that is, these movements of the body that become so expressive when we are animated by the passions. These gestures were sometimes accompanied by cries and inarticulate sounds (g) of the sort that a lively sentiment, a new impression and violent exterior events would naturally draw forth from people who were endowed with the organs of speech. From these cries and confused sounds lucky application eventually formed distinct and articulate sounds which by convention linked ideas to exterior objects until they finally, when pronounced by these people, became signs or arbitrary marks of all things.

This is a knowledgeable account of the argument that Condillac first advanced in 1746 in his *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines*. The reading of the passage becomes more intriguing when we pay atten-

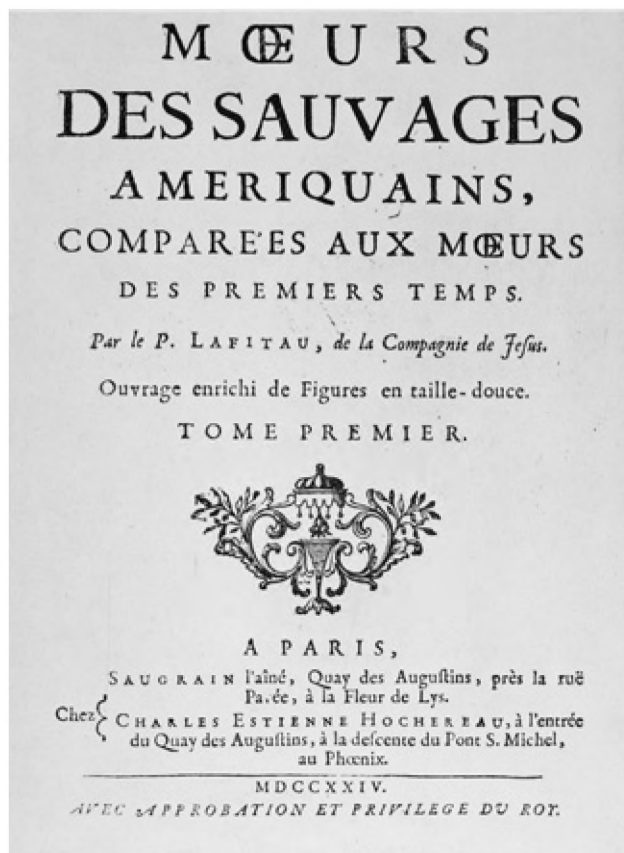
tion to the two notes at f and g. The first makes reference to Lucian of Samosata's dialogue "On the Dance," which tells the story of a mime, in the service of the emperor Nero, who could by gestures alone portray an entire action and communicate meaning so perfectly as to obviate the need for words and speech. The second note at g says that "pain, admiration, surprise, even pleasure evoke mumblings and inarticulate, indeterminate sounds from the organs of voice" (5). Together the quoted passage and the notes give an account of what Condillac called the "language of action," which for him was the proto-language that ultimately evolved into our speech and language.

The citation of Lucian's influential dialogue is noteworthy; it is not cited by Condillac in his *Essai*, but it is in fact, through an intermediary whom Condillac does cite, the certain background of Condillac's language of action.⁴³⁸ It is curious that our author rejected this account in favor of Hebrew, and he does not really make it clear what his grounds are. But his knowledge of the relevant recent literature makes his brief essay an important text in Danish attention to the problem of the origin of language that was so lively during the eighteenth century in France, Germany, Scotland, and Italy.

III

It is fair to say that both Suhm and von Finecke applied their knowledge and reached conclusions that had little in common with what had by the 1760s become accepted opinion on their subjects. By contrast Jens Kraft's compact volume on the principal institutions, customs, and beliefs of primitive nations is innovative and forward looking. It would not have been out of place if it had been published in Scotland at about the same time.⁴³⁹

In the preface to his book Kraft writes that he is chiefly indebted to an author he simply calls "Mr. Lafitau," whom he in fact cites more often than any other source – some forty times compared with a bare five for the Bible. One might be tempted, therefore, to think that Kraft and Lafitau shared similar principles, aims, and emphases. But that is not the case, and to see why we need to take a look at Lafitau in order to be prepared to understand what Kraft is doing.



Frontispiece to Joseph-François Lafitau *Moers des sauvages américains* (Paris 1724).

Joseph-François Lafitau was a French Jesuit who after spending five years as a missionary among the Hurons and Iroquois in North America returned to France in 1718 to write his very large and admirable work entitled simply *Moers des sauvages américains, comparées aux moers des premiers temps*, first published in 1724.⁴⁴⁰ Throughout marked by the author's intelligence, his keen gift of observation and description, his capacity for sympathetic insight, and his effective expository style, this work abounds in detailed information about all aspects of the lives, work, customs, food, kinship relations, crafts, warfare, religion, worship, culture, arts, and social institutions of the primitive population Lafitau came to know in his missionary work. It was owing to this richness that the work in the early decades of the twentieth century became

recognized as a founding text in the history of anthropology and ethnology. But for Lafitau the account of primitive customs was the means toward a higher aim, namely to show that the religion of the Bible and the Church is the universal principle that underlies all the beliefs and customs of mankind. His aim was Christian apologetics.

In building what he called his “system,” Lafitau rejected an argument that had been advanced during the later decades of the seventeenth century, most prominently by the very learned scholar and bishop of Avranches, Pierre-Daniel Huet, who in his large *Demonstratio evangelica* (1679) had taken the position that all worship, laws and culture began with Moses.⁴⁴¹ Contemporaries were quick to note that this was a risky position, for if Huet was right, one might well ask what had happened during the long stretch of time before Moses, who in Ussher’s chronology, as we have seen in connection with Suhm, lived long after the Flood and also long after the Confusion which initiated the dispersal of mankind. With great confidence, Lafitau claimed that his own study “of pagan mythology has opened to me another system of belief and made me go back far beyond the time of Moses, so that I give to our first ancestors, Adam and Eve,” what Huet gave to Moses, thus depriving the atheists “of any pretext for saying that [religion] is the work of man” (1.33–34/13).

Lafitau was now on firm ground: mankind along with its forms of religion and diverse customs had a single origin. In this system, he wrote, it was easy “to conceive how this religion, having been given to our first fathers, must have passed from generation to generation as a kind of heritage common to all and thus spread everywhere” (1.35/14). In addition he demonstrated and argued at length that “the largest number of the American peoples came originally from those barbarians who occupied the continent and islands of Greece” (1.79–80/90), thus from the outset sharing the mythology and beliefs that were later recorded in Greek and Roman sources, beginning, as in Suhm, with Herodotus, Thucydides, and Homer. This doctrine explains why Lafitau’s entire work is devoted to the elucidation of what he called “the continual parallel” (1.36/18) that exists between the customs of the Americans he knew with those of the ancients. *Moeurs* is therefore packed with biblical and classical citations, an evident enough fact which caused Thomas Jefferson to make the rather surly remark that Lafitau was “a man of much classical and biblical reading.”⁴⁴²

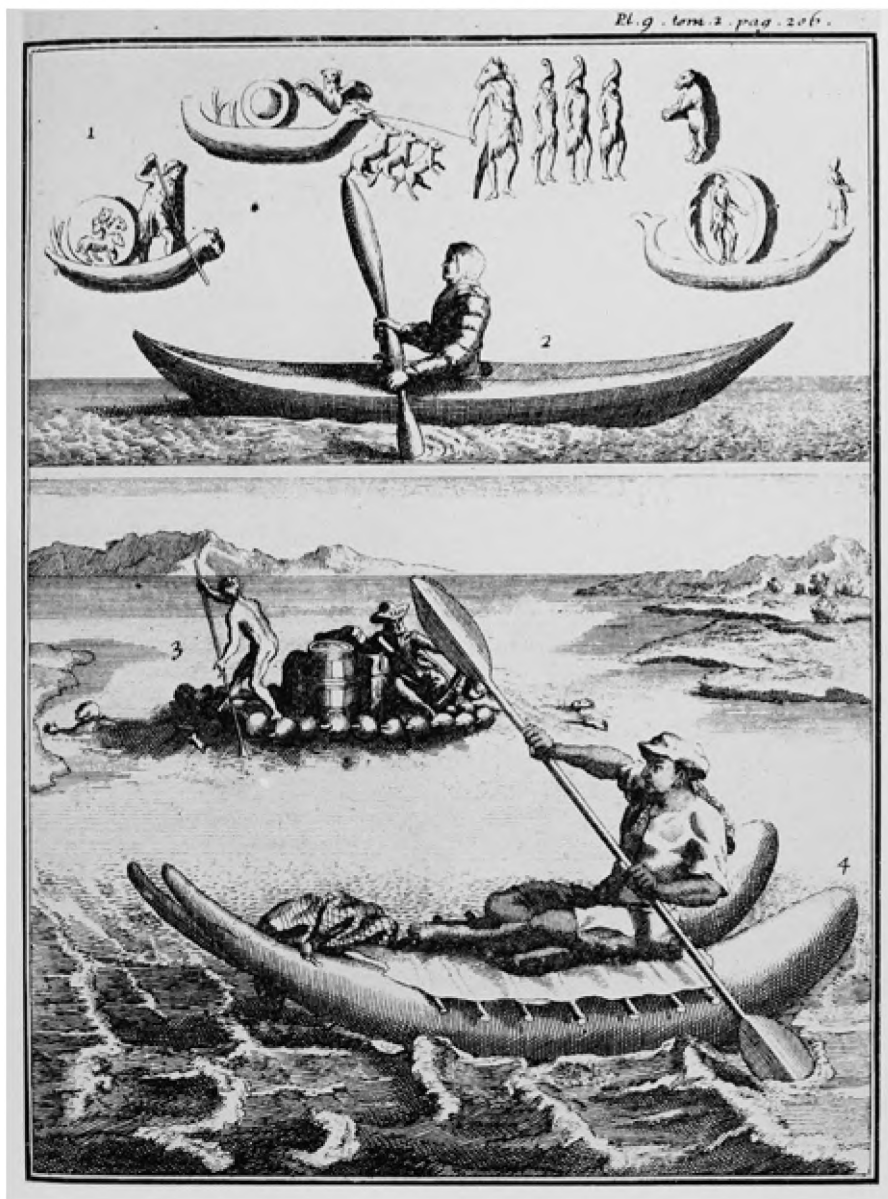


Plate from Joseph-François Lafitau *Moers des sauvages américains* (Paris 1724). Above, an Eskimo Kayak surrounded by ancient monuments from Egypt. Below, the inhabitants of Peru are paddling their balsa rafts.

In the brief opening chapter on “the design and plan of the work” (I.24–41/1–26), Lafitau summarized what he had found. His system revealed that “in spite of the alteration of religion, in spite of the changes made in it among the different peoples of the world, there is everywhere, nevertheless, a certain uniformity in the myths which have some connection with the truth, [both] in certain parts of morality and in many observances required by law which indicate principles similar to those of true religion” (I.35/15), by which he meant his own faith as a Jesuit. In the practices and customs of the Americans he had sought vestiges of “the most remote antiquity,” and in comparing them he had found that, “if the ancient authors have given me information on which to base happy conjectures about the Indians, so the customs of the Indians have given me information by which I can understand more easily and explain more readily many things in the ancient authors” (I.27/3–4).

Thus moving back and forth between his own vast record of detailed observations of Indian customs and the less complete and often enigmatic written records of antiquity, Lafitau’s comparative method yielded fresh insights at both ends, with the ultimate result of showing that Indian beliefs were recognizable versions of the true religion that was the universal heritage of mankind from the first ages. The missionary work was therefore not so much to convert with altogether fresh news of the true faith as to evoke and purify what was left of the divine dispensation that began with Adam and Eve. In his great work Lafitau never treats his subjects as being sinful, degenerate, and perhaps even wicked creatures. They are the late descendants of those who lived in the greater Greek world in the earliest times— “en les premiers temps.”

It would seem evident that this genial attitude of sympathy and understanding animated Lafitau’s amazing powers of detailed observation and unprejudiced description. It is also evident that he abstained from speculation that might imply moral and cultural progress. Kraft’s commitment was very different. His business was not apologetics, but an argument for development and progress. The life of primitive humanity was ruled by the senses while later times—his own time, so Kraft hoped—had come to live by reason, and choosing between the two there could be no question which had the greater value. Whatever hesitations we may have, Kraft wrote, we can be sure that “living according to reason is an incomparably happier state than living by the senses alone,” but

“in our present condition” we are destined to keep a middle way between sense and reason, a “wholly rational and unsensual person would be as weird a creature as a wholly sensual one” (56,60). Kraft’s secular outlook reflected his intellectual environment in the mid-eighteenth century.

As we have seen, Kraft praised Lafitau as his best source, but in the very next sentence of the Preface he also voiced the weighty reservation that Lafitau could have produced a better work, “if his astute pen had sought the origin of the thinking and customs of these people in the savages themselves, in universal human nature and not in foreign sources.” The sense of this statement is that Lafitau’s apologetic aim had not so much deepened our understanding as it had produced support for the lessons that could be drawn from comparison of the biblical and classical traditions. By contrast, Kraft declared on the same page that he had, “to the exclusion of all else, sought to understand man in terms of man himself,”⁴⁴³ which he said “I count as being the only advantage of my work when compared with the works of other authors who have treated the same subject.” Toward the end of the same rich passage in the Preface, Kraft gave a succinct account of his method; in the elucidation of the history of mankind the only right procedure is “to follow the same order as in the knowledge of nature, namely to explain things by what appears in them and by adding to this part of our experience any rare and unknown details that may help us discern what lies hidden in the nature of things.” Kraft saw himself as a naturalist.

Later, in the opening of the third and last section of his work, Kraft gave a fuller account of his principles, an account that was attuned to the subject of that section as stated in its title: “About the worship of the savages and their principal notions, as well as about the general origin of these notions in the pagan world” (222). These pages are the most important in Kraft’s book, and they show his genius for innovation in anthropology. Accordingly I append a translation to make them available to English readers (see Appendix 1).

In these pages Kraft rejects what Lafitau called his system. The “continual parallel” of similarity between Americans and the people of pre-classical Greek times is too weak to sustain the system because the evidence for it is based on “limited similarity in matters of small im-



Plate from Joseph-François Lafitau
*Moers des sauvages
américains* (Paris 1724)
representing the habits
of the Iroquois.

portance,” while disregarding the large differences in matters of great importance. The alternative, then, is to admit that similar myths and customs need not result from the diffusion of a single primeval heritage; it is an idle notion “that a single or a couple of nations... have communicated to all the rest what they think and believe” (228). Here Kraft is introducing the fundamental anthropological principle that, since human nature and the mind are much the same everywhere and at any time in history, it is natural that people in different locations independently develop much the same myths and customs. This principle is based on what later became known as “the psychic unity of mankind.” By obviating the need for diffusion, this principle put anthropology on an entirely new footing.

The diffusion doctrine was prominent throughout much of the nineteenth century, chiefly owing to the prestigious advocacy of Max Müller, who saw the spread of folklore and myth on the analogy of the Indo-European languages. But by the late decades of the century this doc-

trine quickly gave way to the criticism of Andrew Lang, who from the 1870s onward argued for the spontaneous local creation of systems of myth and culture. In his famous article on "Mythology" Lang wrote:

Where similar myths are found among Greeks, Australians, Mangaians and others, it is unnecessary to account for their wide distribution by any hypothesis of borrowing early or late. The Greek "key" patterns found on objects in Peruvian graves were not necessarily borrowed from Greece, not did the Greeks necessarily borrow from Aztecs the "wave" pattern that is common to both.⁴⁴⁴

Kraft's anticipation of Lang is obvious.

Always curious, Andrew Lang asked whether the argument for spontaneous creation might have occurred earlier. His answer was affirmative, as he explained in a brief appendix to a later work under the title, "Fontenelle's forgotten common-sense." In a short essay "De l'Origine des fables," Fontenelle had asked how we could account for the absurdities of Greek myths, and why we no longer believed them, even though we still enjoy them as our heritage from the ancients. His answer was that these myths originated with savages—whether Greek or American—who had so little understanding of natural phenomena that they invented wild and violent narratives to meet their curiosity about the causes of the events they observed. In their ignorance, these "first men"—"les premiers hommes"—imagined that thunder, lightning, rain, storms, and all else were caused by unseen spirits, which they imagined in the shape of persons, who later became gods and goddesses. But in the course of time human understanding improved so that, while the stories stayed with us, they gradually lost their power of explanation, and with that loss also the respect and belief they commanded. Lang concluded that his own theory had been anticipated by Fontenelle's showing that, in Lang's words, "the world-wide similarities of myths are, on the whole, the consequence of a world-wide uniformity of intellectual development."⁴⁴⁵

Is it possible that Kraft was familiar with Fontenelle's essay? The information already given would seem sufficient to show that this is the case, but more can be added, chiefly under two heads: similar formulations on particular points and clear agreement on the basic principles of their arguments. Kraft uses the term "philosophical" about the beliefs of antiquity and of "the very first ages" (225), a somewhat surpris-

ing term for what covers the errors and absurd notions of those times. Kraft's usage stands out because, so far as I can tell, this is the only time it occurs in his book, but Fontenelle has the same usage at least six times, even with a capital P.⁴⁴⁶ For both Kraft and Fontenelle this usage implies that, between savages and moderns, there is an unbroken continuity of efforts to understand the world we live in; it is all philosophy for them as well as for us.

Similar formulations occur also in some passages on climate, which for both has no explanatory value—it is incompatible with the uniformity principle. In this connection Kraft refers to the South Pole, the tropics, and “the Far North of icebergs” (226) while Fontenelle names “le pole” and declares that in what he has been saying, “je n’ai supposé dans les hommes que ce qui est leur commun à tous, et ce qui doit avoir son effet sous les zones glaciales comme sous la torride” (197).⁴⁴⁷ Such overlap hardly occurs by mere chance.

In the sentence just quoted Fontenelle says that he presupposes nothing except what belongs to human nature, which means that his argument is based only on man himself, and that, as we have seen, is also what Kraft in the Preface and later (225, 226, 229) claimed to be the pivot of his method. It follows that the traditional notion of some form of primeval revelation that had degenerated into absurdities must be set aside. Kraft dismissed “the possibility that the beliefs of the pagan world were highly degenerate remnants of the great truths that mankind possessed right after the Flood” (226), and Fontenelle saw only “barbarism and ignorance” in the nations of the first ages “who had not heard of the traditions of the family of Seth” (187). This is a veiled reference to the Church, seeing that Seth was the third son of Adam and Eve, born after the murder of Abel and named by Luke (3.38) in the genealogy of Christ. Both Fontenelle and Kraft hold that the process of enlightenment, from mythology to knowledge, is harmonious with the true religion, but does not strictly depend on it. Progress began even in the first ages with the savage errors of philosophy that would slowly be corrected into knowledge. “Ignorance diminished little by little,” wrote Fontenelle, “and as a consequence people conceived fewer unnatural prodigies and made fewer false systems of philosophy as their narratives gradually became less fabulous, for all these things hang together” (201, 175). Our long history has been a fortunate one, and it contains a lesson we must not ignore.



Painting of Jens Kraft (1720-1765)
by an unknown artist.

To understand Kraft's lesson we can turn to the last page of his book, where he repeats the commitment to natural history which he had already made in the Preface. Now in closing his treatise, he wished again to tell those readers who took natural history to be good only for mere amusement but devoid of utility, that to cure themselves of that delusion all they had to do was to cast a glance at the beliefs of savages to become convinced that, though we may fall into error, "it is our false and preconceived notions that are our most dangerous enemies and very often our invincible tyrants" (378). It was his message that, unless we watch out, we may ourselves fall back toward the savage state. In the midst of a powerful passage against slavery, Kraft declared that we are wrong if we think that savages are more barbarian in heart and mind than we are. Clearly, he saw slavery as one of the fateful consequences of the delusions he warned against. The utility of Kraft's enterprise lies

in what we learn about the long process of errors and their slow correction that has brought us to our present precarious state. This process reveals a history of ourselves, and for Kraft this history was made possible by the facts about savage life which he owed chiefly to Lafitau. Mere speculation will take us nowhere.

In the first line of the remarkable essay “Sur l’histoire,” Fontenelle announced that his subject was “the utility of history.” He had in mind, he said, to do something unexpected, namely “de faire l’histoire de l’histoire” (169). He was not after the familiar kind of history that piles up facts and details about events of human action, for it fails to know the motives of the human heart that caused the events—this is a clear formulation and critique of what around 1900 became known, pejoratively, as “histoire événementielle.” In making his history of history, he said, he acted much like the philosopher who, with an assortment of natural effects and observations before him, must puzzle out likely causes with the aim of gaining a coherent, over-all view of things—“voilà le système” (176). Like the naturalist, the historian also begins with facts and seeking the motivation behind them as he sets about building his “système de l’histoire.” This is where the utility of history begins, as he writes in this wonderful passage which is best left in his own words:

J’appelle utile, quant à ce qui regard l’esprit, tout ce qui nous conduit ou à nous connoître, ou à connoître les autres; et ces deux choses me paroissent à-peu-près également utiles, parce que souvent on se connoît mieux dans les autres que dans soi-même, et qu’enfin il est fort à propos de savoir comment sont faits ces hommes avec qui l’on a tant de liaisons différentes. (177).

If this passage about knowing ourselves by the reflecting mirror of knowing others has a familiar ring, it is because it calls to mind Hume’s remark that “the minds of men are mirrors to one another,” which also speaks for Adam Smith. The study of early beliefs and ancient myths puts before us the errors and derangements of the human mind, and the knowledge we gain becomes our guide in staying close to the path of truth and reason. Fontenelle and Kraft found the utility of their history in this guidance.⁴⁴⁸

It has been said that Rousseau’s Second *Discourse*, on the origin of inequality among human beings, “was clearly the chief inspiration for

parts one and two of Kraft's work."⁴⁴⁹ Of course the dates would fit; the *Discourse* appeared in 1755 and Moses Mendelssohn's German translation in 1756, the latter presumably having been the text Kraft used as indicated by the single reference he makes to the *Discourse* (29). Now, when postulating inspiration it is generally understood that evident features of the source flow recognizably into the object of the inspiration; that is what we mean when we say that Beethoven's early compositions owed much to Haydn, or that Wagner found deep affinity in Beethoven's late quartets. In that case it is hard to see how Rousseau's *Discourse* could have been more than, at best, a passing impulse for Kraft. The truly fundamental difference is that Rousseau's work is about political philosophy, while Kraft's is not. Rousseau argued from the state of nature toward later institutions, the social contract being first among them. Kraft argued forward from savages, that is, from subjects who already lived in societies, with formed institutions and beliefs, settled customs, languages, and traditions. Rousseau argued against Hobbes, Locke, and Pufendorf, while Kraft sought to instill a naturalist culture among his contemporaries.

Furthermore, Rousseau unlike Kraft idealized the pre-social state of nature, found that social man becomes weak and decadent, and that "nothing is as gentle as [man] in his primitive state when, placed by Nature at equal distance from the stupidity of the brutes and the fatal enlightenment of man."⁴⁵⁰ Kraft built on the facts he found in Lafitau and other travel records. By contrast, Rousseau declared at the outset that he would "set aside all the facts, for they do not affect the question," thus freeing himself to conjecture on "what Mankind might have become if it had remained abandoned to itself." Though they are all fascinating, there is hardly any common ground between Rousseau on one side and Fontenelle and Kraft on the other. It would make good sense to change Kraft's title to read "Anti-Rousseau or a Brief Account of the principal Institutions," etc.

I have argued that Kraft drew inspiration from Fontenelle's essay "De l'origine des fables" and most likely also from the closely related essay "Sur l'histoire." Both were published in the same volume in 1758 in an edition of Fontenelle that was coming out in those years. At the time Fontenelle was very well known, even famous, and his general orientation toward science and modernity must have appealed to Kraft. But Kraft must have seen that Fontenelle's brilliant essays had no facts

to support the insouciant equation of ancient mythology with American customs, with “les mœurs des premiers temps.” Early in his work on *Myth, Ritual, and Religion*, Andrew Lang observed that “Origine” is “brief, sensible, and witty, and requires little but copious evidence to make it adequate. But [Fontenelle] merely threw out the idea, and left it to be neglected.”⁴⁵¹ Kraft alone rose to the occasion Fontenelle had created; he alone remedied what Lang felt had been unjustly ignored. It was his genius to marry Lafitau to Fontenelle. Kraft’s achievement in European letters is very great indeed, though it is accompanied by the mournful reflection that his work suffered eclipse.

Appendix 1

Jens Kraft

Kort Fortælning af de Vilde Folks fornemmeste Indretninger, Skikke og Meninger, til Oplysning af det menneskelige Oprindelse og Fremgang i Almindelighed, pp. 224-232

The history of primitive nations everywhere shows man as he is by nature, before he was changed by art. The simple mode of living of these nations is as simple as their mode of thinking, and it is without doubt among the most important benefits we can expect to gain from accounts of them, that we may thereby conjecture how [225] beliefs about invisible and spiritual matters have been formed, apart from the Church, in the first ages of the world. If I here in good part follow another plan than has formerly prevailed in a large number of astute and very learned treatises, in which several illustrious writers have in one way or another sought to cast light on this truly recondite matter, then it is because I believe that the general tendency has been to look for something more elevated in the mode of thinking than human nature allows, and not to have made a sufficient effort to explain man in terms of himself. I believe it is possible to show how man left to himself could not think in any way that was much different from the thinking of today's primitive people, and I shall try to identify the factors which have made a virtual necessity of this mode of thought. Though we may today know the philosophical beliefs of the ancient world better than we know the common mind of the very first ages, it would still seem we can reasonably conclude that the latter was entirely the same as it is among primitive nations today, so that there is hardly any difference between the two. [226] It follows that there must everywhere have been one and the same cause of human beliefs in the same circumstances; otherwise people would think differently at the South Pole than in the tropics, and there again not the same as in the Far North of icebergs. So long as this cause can be found in man himself, and in the understanding as it may manifest itself in its earliest infancy, as it were, and thereafter over long years falling into one error after another before finding a path to truth—so long as that is the case we would not seem to have the right to seek any other cause.

We need, however, to consider the possibility that the beliefs of the

pagan world were highly degenerate remnants of the great truths that mankind possessed right after the Flood, and that these beliefs all had their common origin there. The chief weakness of this otherwise sensible view lies in the striking dissimilarity of the most important basic truths in the true and in the pagan doctrines. Unless I am mistaken, it is rather contradictory to base such an origin [i.e., from just after the Flood] of pagan beliefs on a limited similarity in matters of small importance when the dissimilarity [227] is so very large in matters of the greatest importance. Thus when the Egyptians and the Phoenicians, who are commonly taken to be the teachers of the entire pagan world, on the one hand attribute everything to God, and yet, whatever one may say in their defense, on the other hand believe both that all the Gods together had come into being by the irrational forces vested in matter, without knowing either how or by what means, and also believe that man as well as animals had grown out of the earth almost like toadstools without even the slightest assistance from the supreme being, then I don't see how, with this disregard of the central issue, one can still believe that the rest of their doctrines could have been proclaimed in the exalted and eternal truths which God himself has taught to man. All told, the Church loses little by repudiating such errant disciples [i.e., the Egyptians and Phoenicians]. That the Church alone has [228] recognized the important truths of a single God, about creation out of nothing, about the simple essence of the soul, about the sinfulness of man, etc., is incomparably greater proof of its lofty and divine origin, than finding that there is often some slight similarity in its customs, beliefs and narratives with those of paganism.

Likewise, we have little reason to think that a single or a couple of nations in the world should have communicated to all the rest what they think and believe; that India, for instance, should have learnt the transmigration of souls from the Egyptians, that the Americans should have their customs and institutions from the Lycians.⁴⁵² People all over the world seem to have had the same customs and the same beliefs because the understanding would on the whole develop pretty much in the same manner. Human thought and what it thinks about were everywhere the same [229], and if the manner of conceiving things was not exactly the same, still it never varied so much that this alone could cause a huge difference in thinking; do we need to say more to realize that people everywhere could have the same notions of the same things. Both in primitive nations and in the people of the first ages,

there is in their mode of thinking so little that is not owed to nature and so much evidence of utter artlessness that we can easily believe that they have themselves, without any teacher, invented what constitutes their knowledge.

In order to see how the first ages would necessarily come to entertain their absurd and ludicrous conceptions of God and the world, we still need to imagine man in the first state as being ignorant of everything. In the midst of this ignorance he began to speculate on the causes of things; he began to draw conclusions on the basis of the little he knew, paying most attention to what centered [230] on himself. Man soon understood that the outward human appearance could not be the true cause of his thoughts, actions, and changing states. This was the first emergence of the thought that the true cause of human actions and behavior was some active [but] invisible human essence; when this essence was seen to show over the entire body even in its smallest effects, then this invisible something, this soul or spirit, was conceived to inhabit the body and thus itself having bodily form, [though] a quality always invisible, very subtle and inaccessible to the senses. All primitive nations and the whole world of antiquity universally agree in attributing to man not only the visible body in the flesh, but also immaterial or spiritual essences, so that we cannot doubt that this idea has been natural to man, adopted everywhere and one of the oldest in the world. By extension considering the animals, people found such evident similarity between them and man, that they did not hesitate to [231] invest them with a soul, or perhaps more than one, thus locating the causes of the visible in what did not appear to the eye. Thinking beyond that, people became still more strongly confirmed in the idea that the true causes of what occurred in nature were hidden, that they were invisible even the very moment they first came before the eye. This warranted the belief that all natural events were caused by invisible spirits, and this initial thought, in itself true, later gave rise to the most egregious errors.

We humans naturally draw our inferences by using the little we know as the basis for explaining what remains. What we observe in some familiar things is generally held to apply also to other events if it seems at all plausible to do so. Though this way of drawing inferences is very wrong, it is still the first way practiced by man and the one that, after a thousand errors, has in most cases shown the way to truth. This procedure

seems to have guided the people of the first ages [232] to lay down the basic principle that, since an invisible being caused the actions of men as well as animals, then, not seeing any other possible cause, it must follow that everything in nature that, like the animals, can perform and determine its own actions, is inhabited and motivated by an invisible being: thus everything in nature would necessarily be thought to be alive. It is evident that savages and antiquity, in their understanding of natural phenomena, all agreed in the origin they assigned to these effects, so that in this matter it is pointless to seek confirmation in particular cases.

Appendix 2

On the authorship of *Systema mundi*
generally attributed to Kraft

In the literature on Kraft, including the most recent, it is said that Kraft was the author of a Latin treatise, known under the brief title *Systema mundi*, which was submitted for a prize-essay contest set by the Berlin Academy on the Leibnitian philosophy of monads. It did not gain the prize, but was published in 1748 in an omnibus volume which contained the six best essays chosen from the thirty submissions. All but two of these essays were published without the author's name. Since *Systema mundi* is called Kraft's masterpiece and the most advanced exposition of his philosophy, it is crucial to be clear about the authorship. But on this point the literature is silent. It is simply taken for granted that the attribution to Kraft is an established fact that does not need to be supported by evidence, argument, or even reference to a source that provides the necessary information.

S. V. Rasmussen's entry on Kraft in *Dansk Biografisk Leksikon*, 2nd ed., vol. 13 (1938), 207–09 (which is repeated in the 3rd ed., vol. 8 (1981), 220–1) gives ample bibliographical references. Among them is S. A. Christensen, *Matematikkens Udvikling i Danmark og Norge i det XVIII. Aarhundrede* (Odense, 1895), which treats Kraft on pp. 138–62, with bibliography on pp. 140–1, where it says: "I Berlins Videnskabsakademies Samling over Monaderne skyldes ham Nr. 10, *Systema mundi deductum ex principiis monadicis*," without evidence for this attribution. It is repeated two years later in Oscar Hansen, *Filosofien i Danmark i det 18. og 19. Aarhundrede*, Part I, *Indledningsperioden 1700–1765* (Copenhagen, 1897). Here about Kraft on pp. 50–63, with this attribution on p. 59: "*Systema mundi deductum ex principiis Mondadicis*, der 1747 tryktes i Berliner Selskabets Samling om Monaderne," again without evidence. Christensen refers generally to Chr. Molbech, *Det Kongelige danske Videnskabernes Selskabs Historie i det første Aarhundrede* (Copenhagen, 1843). This work mentions Kraft, but says nothing about the prize contest or about *Systema mundi*. Oscar Hansen refers to N. M. Petersen, *Bidrag til den danske Litteraturs Historie*, which in vol. 5, Part I (1860) treats Kraft on pp. 138–62, without mention of *Systema mundi*. Kraft's name appears in other printed sources before Molbech in 1843 and Petersen in 1860,

but if these sources had any information about the Latin treatise, one must assume that they would have said so, and indeed that Christensen in 1895, if he knew about any such source, would have cited it in support of his claim. The copy of the omnibus volume in the Royal Library in Copenhagen carries no information about authorship. I mention this because one could imagine that Christensen had used this copy and might have found Kraft's name written in it.⁴⁵³ Thus it remains a puzzle how Kraft's name became attached to what is called his masterpiece; it is also puzzling that no one has hitherto gone after solid evidence.

Then in 1980 relevant information appeared in a book where no one thinking of Kraft would ever have looked for it. This is the story. Condillac had submitted an essay in the same competition, and this essay was published in the same omnibus volume of submissions as *Systema mundi*. In his *Traité des animaux* (1755), Condillac added a note to the chapter on "How man acquires the knowledge of God," and the note said: "This chapter is almost entirely drawn from a dissertation, written some years ago, that is printed in a collection by the Berlin Academy, and to which I did not put my name." This mysterious item remained lost until Laurence L. Bongie tracked it down and published it in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 187 (1980), with Condillac's name and the title *Les Monades*. With care and good evidence, Bongie showed that the great mathematician Leonard Euler attributed *Systema mundi* to Samuel Koenig, whom Euler at the time knew well personally. Euler was very much an insider in the Berlin Academy, and he was especially active in judging the submissions in this competition. He was known to be very critical of the doctrine of monads and is generally credited with making sure that the prize went to a critic of that doctrine. Euler had read *Systema mundi* and praised it without being convinced: "Il faut avouer que cet Auteur se soutient partout admirablement bien, et qu'il ne laisse aucune prise aux arguments ordinaires contre le système des monades; et il semble même que le système n'est soutenable que sur ce piet là" (Bongie 27–9). Bongie is citing from records in the Berlin Academy. Kurt Müller's *Leibniz Bibliographie. Die Literatur über Leibniz* (Frankfurt, 1967) lists the items in the omnibus volume in entries 2128–34. At 2130 he suggests that *Systema mundi* is "presumably by Professor Kraft zu Soroe," without further remark. He also notes that excerpts were published in Samuel Formey, *Mélanges philosophiques* (Leiden, 1754), 2 vols.: I.446–62. Euler might be wrong,

but in light of Bongie's careful research that would seem unlikely. It is to be hoped that scholarship on Kraft will take a fresh look at this crucial matter. It would also be interesting to find out, if possible, how the claim for Kraft's authorship gained acceptance without further question.