

# DEMYSTIFYING ROUSSEAU’S “SAVAGES”: METHODOLOGICAL STRUCTURE AND HEURISTIC FUNCTION

DESMISTIFICANDO OS “SELVAGENS” DE ROUSSEAU: ESTRUTURA  
METODOLÓGICA E FUNÇÃO HEURÍSTICA<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT:

There is a whole tradition of studies that has superimposed a mythical structure on the concepts of the “savage” in the pure state of nature, and of the American peoples who are also called “savages”: the myth of the “good savage”, the golden age, the terrestrial paradise, etc. Despite the efforts made by other authors to dispel this interpretation, it has not been shown that it jeopardises the central thesis of Rousseau’s anthropology: the defence of natural goodness. We are interested here precisely in uncovering these risks, which may be, at least in part, the result of a biased reading of Derrida’s *Grammatology*.

## KEYWORDS:

Rousseau, myth of the “good savage”, Demythologisation, Anthropology, natural goodness.

## RESUMO:

Existe toda uma tradição de estudos que sobrepôs a estrutura mítica aos conceitos do “selvagem” no puro estado de natureza, e dos povos americanos igualmente chamados de “selvagens”: mito do “bom selvagem”, época ou idade de ouro, paraíso terreal, etc. Apesar dos esforços empreendidos por outros autores, a fim de se desfazerem desta interpretação, não se mostrou que ela põe em risco a tese central da antropologia de Rousseau: a defesa da bondade natural. Nos interessamos aqui, precisamente, a

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desvelar tais riscos, que podem ser, ao menos em parte, o resultado de uma leitura enviesada da *Gramatologia* de Derrida.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Rousseau, mito do “bom selvagem”, Desmitificação, Antropologia, bondade natural.

## I

Despite the demystification efforts already undertaken – as we will see later –, an interpretation, generally poorly justified, persists in relation to Rousseau's “savages”. In this interpretative current, a conceptual indistinction prevails between the different uses that Rousseau makes of the “savage” in his “*théorie de l'homme*” and, consequently, the overlap of the mythical structure, especially with the vague idea of a myth of the “bon sauvage” or “noble savage”, in its Anglo-Saxon version. Such interpretations appear hand-in-hand, and the mythological overlap is applied, sometimes to the “wild man” of the pure state of nature, sometimes to the indigenous peoples called “savage”. These two modalities of the “savage” make up the genetic historicity of the *Discourse on Inequality*, from 1755 (*second Discourse*). However, it can be argued that the first signs of the supposed panegyric of “*bon sauvage*” date back to the 1750s, in the notes to the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, where Rousseau evokes indigenous peoples (“*les sauvages de l'Amérique*”) through Montaigne's perspective. In these notes, these “savages” could be related to the myth of an idealized freedom, or a pre-Adamic purity, as these “savages” “do not even know by name the vices that we work so hard to repress” (DSA, OC III, p. 11).

Regarding terminological use, we know that Rousseau himself uses the term “savage” or “savages” in a way that confuses the reader, even though he refers, through syntax, to distinct characteristics (Bachofen, 2021, p. 31): physical or sensitive quality of the “wild man”; social quality of the “savage” of nascent societies, etc. In relation to the mythical reference, Rousseau also does not make the reader's task easier. At certain moments, he himself alludes to a “golden century”, to designate the

“times of barbarism” (EOL, OC V, p. 396), and to a youth of humanity (“*jeunesse du monde*”), in relation to nascent societies (DI, OC III, p. 171).<sup>2</sup>

It is no secret that, from Plato to Descartes, the use of myths appears as a constant – despite being guided by variations – in the construction of philosophical thought. Philosophy has always made specific, priority or secondary use of myth, in search of a descriptive ordering of origins, or even to establish the ontological and political structure, without, however, substantiating the purpose of the discourse on its attributes, flashed outside of time and space – a common property of myths (Eliade, 1963, p. 9; Cassirer, 1972, p. 133; Jensen, 1954, p. 205). Plato makes it clear, in the *Sophist* (242c-d), that it is not a matter, with the then emerging philosophy, of using myths as if telling a fable to children (Vernant, 1988, p. 202), the myth is always subjugated to the theoretical development and its purpose.<sup>3</sup>

When insisting on the demystification of “savages”, we do not advocate, however, a denial of the evident traits that refer to myth in Rousseau’s work, nor do we want to disqualify the mythical discourse itself, which has its own reality (with its truth, its principles and symbolic structures). The field of references is undeniable: the return to the origins, with genetic historicity; an indeterminate time and space; a “golden century”; the kindness of the “wild man”, etc. However, the solution of superimposing a fully referenced myth on the “savages”, whether through biblical tradition (Earthly Paradise) or the “primitivism” of the ancients (golden century or age), seems to us not only inadequate but, in a certain way, harmful to Rousseau’s theses, in particular, to that of natural goodness.<sup>4</sup>

The indigenous peoples, which Rousseau evokes – in a process of conceptual generalization (Goldschmidt, 1987, p. 448) – in the expression “savages”, or “Savages of America”, also integrate the supposed mythological reference. Already at the time of the Enlightenment, Rousseau’s “adversaries” understood that it was not a mythological use, but programmatic. Ultimately, it is the so-called “savage” societies that provide the observable data of experience for the conception of a “*juste milieu*”, even if “uncivilized”, for the species (DI, OC III, p. 171). It was upon realizing the theoretical relevance of “savage” societies that authors such as Joseph de Maistre and Cornelius De Pauw – supported

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<sup>2</sup> All the quotes from Rousseau refer to the work *Oeuvres complètes*, Gallimard (“Bibliothèque de la Pléiade”), in 5 volumes, under the organization of B. Gagnebin e M. Raymond. For the acronyms used, refer to the bibliographical references.

<sup>3</sup> On the relationship between Plato and Rousseau’s use of myth, cf. V. Goldschmidt (2019, p. 238); and between Descartes and Rousseau, cf. the article “Mythes, fictions et naturalité” by André Charrak (2013).

<sup>4</sup> On Rousseau’s departure from Greco-Roman primitivism, refer to *Primitivism and related ideas in Antiquity* by Arthur O. Lovejoy and Georges Boas (1935).

scientifically by Buffon, and historically by Robertson – defended, in a direct attack on Rousseau, not only degeneration (de Maistre), but the annihilation (De Pauw) of these societies.<sup>5</sup>

The expository sequence can then be announced based on the following question: to what extent does the interpretation of the myth obscure (i) the perception of the epistemological function of the “savage” in the theoretical development of Rousseau’s anthropology and, more specifically, (ii) of the good functioning of the theory of natural goodness?

We referred previously to a resumption of demystification, because efforts have already been undertaken by several historians, such as Émile Bréhier, for example – who reminds us that “Rousseau carefully removes everything that could give his thought the appearance of a myth” (1938, p. 470) –, and, a little more incisively, by Victor Goldschmidt (2019, p. 448). Regarding the Anglo-Saxon tradition, Ter Ellingson (2001) demonstrated that this myth would not have its modern origin in Rousseau, without revealing, however, the interpretative risks of this mythification.

With exceptions, we have a whole set of studies that revisit the historical path of the myth of the “noble savage”, seeking to demonstrate its origins not only in relation to the myth of the golden age, but also in relation to the myth of origins and Earthly Paradise, as already highlighted. The myth of the “noble savage” appears, in such studies, incorporated by the symbolism that permeates the traditions of orality, theological and mythological literature. When we consider these studies, we realize that they support, in a certain way, the majority interpretation of Rousseau’s “savages”. Despite the advances provided by historians who have pointed out the inadequacy of the interpretative overlap of the myth, a gap persists regarding an approach that seeks to confront both the whys and the cross-readings that may have induced such overlap. It is in this sense that we will follow here, seeking to equally demonstrate the exegetical risks of this interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> By Joseph de Maistre, refer to *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, or *Entretiens sur le gouvernement temporel de la Providence* (1822), and *Examen d'un écrit de J.-J. Rousseau sur l'inégalité des conditions parmi les hommes* (1779); by Cornelius De Pauw, cf. *Recherches philosophiques sur les américains* or *Mémoires intéressants pour servir à l'Histoire de l'Espèce humaine* (1768). Buffon’s influential judgements can be found in his work *Histoire naturelle*, especially in the chapter “Variétés dans l’espèce humaine”; and regarding Robertson, refer to *The History of America* (1777). For an overview of the philosophical reception of the “savages”, refer to *La disputa del Nuovo Mundo. Storia di una polemica (1750-1900)*, by Antonello Gerbi (2000).

<sup>6</sup> J. Terrasse (1970, p. 73), even treating the “golden age” as a “postulate of reason and heart”, without delay, refers to myth, or rather to a “definition of myth given by Lévi-Strauss” (in the third chapter of *La pensée sauvage*).

## II

Let us begin with the exemplary case of a specialist in myths, Mircea Eliade. Despite considering that “myth is an extremely complex cultural reality, which can be approached and interpreted through multiple perspectives” (Eliade, 1963, p. 14), M. Eliade defines it as follows: “myth tells a sacred story; he reports an event that occurred in primordial time, the fabulous time of the ‘beginning’” (*idem*, p. 15). In this understanding, all the literature that discusses the myth of the “noble savage”, whether by utopians or ideologists from the 16th to the 18th century, ends up denouncing the profound “nostalgia for the Edenic condition” (Eliade, 1957, p. 42). Through this interpretative route, the historian and mythologist never fail to link Rousseau to this tradition, driven by nostalgia, or rather, by mythologized memories (*idem*, p. 43). The same interpretation reverberates in the analyses of several historians of philosophy. Returning to the comments of Gilbert Chinard (1911, p. 491), Pierre Villey had written, in his introduction to the chapter “Of Cannibals” by Montaigne, that it is an “idealization of the savage in the manner of Tacitus’ Germania”, which would be linked to an “ancient tradition dear to moralists of all times”, and that in this theme, a continuous set of works would link Montaigne to Rousseau (Villey, *apud*; Montaigne, 2004, p. 202).<sup>78</sup>

Later, Colette Fleuret, in her study on *Rousseau et Montaigne*, elucidated the issue of the myth of the “noble savage” as a “nostalgia common to Montaigne and Rousseau” (Fleuret, 1980, p. 48). In general, interpretations hesitate among myth, idealization and nostalgia, which still resonates strongly in more recent literature, as, for example, in *L’idée d’étranger chez les philosophes des Lumières* (Baysson, 2002), where the author continues the interpretative confusion, mixing, in turn, the myth of the “noble savage” in the pure state of nature, with the myth of the “noble savage” identified with the cabin period, which follows from the first family formations to the “nascent societies” (*idem*, p. 225-232). In *Rousseau, de l’empirisme à l’expérience*, André Charrak (2012, p. 26) also considers that Rousseau resumes, mainly with the “age of the huts”, the “typical features of the myth of the golden age”, without, however, reducing himself to these features, nor simply repeating them.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, by listing so many myths (Roman myth, myth of antiquity, myth of Socrates, etc.), D. Leduc-Fayette (1974, p. 157) relates this nostalgia for antiquity and, above all, for the “community city”, to the myth of the “*polis* of the Ancients”.

<sup>8</sup> Y. Touchefeu designates, in turn, as a “reminder of early times” (1989, p. 182).

<sup>9</sup> D. Leduc-Fayette, at another point, it converges all the myths – of the state of nature, of a golden age, of the “ancient republics and even the paradise of Clarens” – into one and the same idealisation that reshapes and synchronises them (1974,

Let's look at an even more specific work on the subject: *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Univers mythique et cohérence* by Marc Eigeldinger (1978). In this, the author would have already got rid of the confusion between the myth of the "Earthly Paradise" and the myth of the "golden age" in Rousseau's thought, also presenting the advantage of developing, even if partially, a key, or better saying, one of the keys to understanding so as not to fall into the mythical interpretation of the cabin period. However, despite this understanding key, the author did not escape such an interpretation, distinguishing the references only to better locate the myths in that thought (Eigeldinger, 1978, p. 85)<sup>10</sup>:

The work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau – writes Eigeldinger – [...] is not only dominated by the obsession with paradise, but by the mythical vision of the golden age. It contains two descriptions of this privileged time of prehistory, the first at the beginning of the second part of the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, the second in chapter IX of the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, 'Formation of Languages', and a number of scattered allusions that, for the most part, follow the desire to internalize the myth. The golden age, as Rousseau describes it in the [second] *Discourse* and *Essay*, is located in a mythical space, specific to the people of *Midi*, and in a mythical time, intermediate between nature and society; it corresponds to the passage, impossible to determine in historical duration, from the innocence of the state of nature to the foundation of the civil state (*idem*, p. 96).

Now, that Rousseau uses, in one way or another, the nomenclature common to myths is not a fact that can be denied. However, before re-signifying, and without reservations, the referential use that the philosopher makes of myths, one must understand the reasons for the reference, that is, one must know the intention of appropriation and expropriation coherent with the conjectural and hypothetical plan of the genetic historicity. M. Eigeldinger's text is symptomatic and serves us here as an example to illustrate the interpretative confusion that comes between the second *Discourse* and the *Essay on the Origin of Languages (Essay)*, as well as between the "nascent societies" and the "early times", and even between two distinct moments of the state of nature.<sup>11</sup>

Apparently, the confusion is due, at least in part, to an inadvertent reading of *De la Grammatologie*, by Jacques Derrida (1967). This slanted reading blurs the perception of the relationship between the second part of the *second Discourse* and chapter IX of the *Essay*. Such misunderstanding also results from the lack of an analytical understanding of Rousseau's hypothetical plan and the reduction of his methodology to an "internalization of myth".

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p. 159). And earlier, Jean Terrasse, arguing that the "good savage is present in almost all of Rousseau's writings" (1970, p. 90), converges the "Roman myth and the myth of the good savage" into a single "mental representation" (*idem*, p. 91).

<sup>10</sup> As R. Gonnard has done, in *La légende du bon sauvage*, and that D. Leduc-Fayette (1974, p. 153-154) supported in note 61.

<sup>11</sup> G. Gliozzi (1989, p. 195) had already warned that the mythical structure is antagonistic to Rousseau's hypothetical plan; that structure, if put into practice, would annul the effective functioning of this plan.

To better understand the interpretative mess, let us return here to chapter IX of the *Essay*, especially the section in which Rousseau writes: “This time of barbarism was the golden age; not because men were united, but because they were separated” (EOL, OC V, p. 396). Then, in a note, he adds: “I call the first times those of the dispersion of men, at whatever age of the human race one wants to attribute to the era” (*idem*). We have here two references apparently capable of inducing an overlap of the mythical plane: a “golden century” and the indeterminacy of time in its origins. When dealing with the indeterminacy of time, Derrida observes that “the expression ‘the first times’, and all the indices to be used to describe them, do not, therefore, refer to any date, to any event, to any chronology”, so that “facts can be varied without modifying the structural invariant”, since “it is a time before time” (Derrida, 1967, p. 357).<sup>12</sup>

The reasons provided by Rousseau, combined with this reading of Derrida’s text, fit perfectly for the exegetical superimposition of the mythical structure, as M. Eigeldinger (1978, p. 97) and many others. Henri Gouhier, for example, awakens the pure expression of the myth to the “eternal spring” of the *Essay* – even if it is surrounded by another myth, that of the “first times” –, without worrying about decanting the particularities that can unite or separate the myth of the fable (Gouhier, 1984, p. 18-19). Every myth has, in principle, a fictitious form that links it to the fable (since, invariably, “myths are engendered by a fable function” (Gusdorf, 1972, p. 120)); but not every fable, in its form and field of intentions, protects the sacred elements of the myth. It should be remembered that, in the Rousseauist lexicon, mythology gains a negative connotation. And Rousseau rejects it in the very heart of a fable – *Le corbeau et le renard*, by Lafontaine – analysed by him in book II of *Émile*: “Here we are suddenly projected into lying antiquity; almost in mythology” (E, OC IV, p. 354). The lie that permeates, in certain aspects, the discourse of ancientness, is related to that which integrates fable and myth.<sup>13</sup>

The time after time<sup>14</sup> coincides “with a mythical era”, says Eigeldinger (1978, p. 100), and remember that, in this exegetical overlap – following in the same pathway by M. Eliade – “the myth [...]

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<sup>12</sup> So, as V. Goldschmidt (2019, p. 234-235) comments, “This mythical appearance seems as well founded as the scientific aspect of its narrative. It comes from this uniformity, closed in on itself and emptied of any event [...] It comes, more precisely, from its anti-historical characteristic: unlike ‘prehistory’, this permanence is clearly outside of all history, of all becoming; with efforts one could say that it precedes history, so much so that it is heterogeneous to it. It seems to oppose history like eternity opposes time”.

<sup>13</sup> However, with regard to the good savage – which interpretations currently impose on man in the state of nature – H. Gouhier takes another route and denies any “apology for the good savage” in this state, recognizing, however, the good savage in those “who live in certain historical societies” (1984, p. 24).

<sup>14</sup> That G. Gliozzi (1989, p. 198) had missed.

participates in the sacred” and “normally unfolds in the nostalgia of this perfection that is located in sacred time and space” (*idem*, p. 13, 14-15). In addition to founding the origin, this perfection unfolds in a projective sense, “oriented towards the achievement of a perfection that belongs to the future” (*idem*, p. 15). In short, “the golden age is defined by purity and stillness: it is disturbed neither by hatred nor by war, nor by the noise of weapons manufacturing” (*idem*, p. 94). What is outlined in this mythical horizon are the texts of antiquity, Virgil’s *Georgics*, Tibullus’ *Elegies* (*idem*) or Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (Charrak, 2012, p. 26). It should be noted, however, that Rousseau’s text complicates the reflection on the “early times” and “nascent societies”, as it also did in relation to wild, primitive man, in the pure state of nature. If Rousseau makes reference to a “golden century”, it is precisely – according to our reading hypothesis – dissolving, delegitimizing the mythical reference, i. e., he carries out, through fiction subordinated to hypothetical theory, a work of demystification of the reference, in the sense of deconstructing the immaculate, perfect myth, which is found in sacred time and space.<sup>15</sup>

The “golden century” of early times designates a time of barbarism, coeval with the alienation of the family nucleus, where man appears as a “ferocious animal” (EOL, OC V, p. 395), without giving evidence of a “*moi relatif*”, nor a “*moi humain*”. The “savages” are, at this stage, “enemies of the rest of the world” (*idem*, p. 396). If M. Eigeldinger affirms that there is no war in the “early times”, he seems to forget that Rousseau locates the “golden century”, in the *Essay*, in an interrelational tension that escapes the immaculate dimension of the sacred that makes up and structures the myth, since “everywhere a state of war reigned in this place”, even if “the whole earth was at peace” (*idem*). This is, doubly, one of the high points of Rousseau’s anthropological thought: firstly, by getting rid of the argument of authority, whether the theological-Christian one or that of a mythological summary – because, since antiquity, as G. Gusdorf (1972, p. 114), it is known that it is always a “caste of clergyman that transmits myths and performs sacred rites” according to its own interests; secondly, for conceiving a state of war without affirming, however, the anthropological disposition of natural and continuous violence.

Under the appearance of the paradox (war and peace) emerges a formula reflected on the relational games of man in the state of nature. If men “attacked each other when they met”, it would not be a harmful state at all, since “they rarely met”. There is peace, but there is, at the same time, a singular

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<sup>15</sup> We have thus responded, and in agreement, to the question made by G. Gliozzi (1989, p. 194), when he asks whether the perfection of the myth could “coexist with Rousseau’s genealogical explanation”, or whether we should see there “a critical disaggregation of the fundamental elements of the myth [...] which aims to demolish every element of the myth” (*idem*, p. 195).



state of war. In any case, it is worth noting that the dubious and intermittent war of the state of nature and the bloody war of "savage" societies (the latter interpreted, since Montaigne, as a virtuous, heroic war, driven by a sense of honour), are not equivalent to civil wars. In the civil state, the relationship with things, with property, experienced in an advanced state of denaturation, shape and consolidate the strong meaning of war, as well as that of the master-slave relationship.<sup>16</sup>

Even though these wars, in these two periods of the state of nature, are not equivalent to state wars, they introduce a bestiality, in the first case, and a disharmony, in the second case, which contrast with the immaculate tranquillity typical of the era of myth, but also with the wars and deadly disagreements that this can also entail: because the mythical determination necessarily obeys its respective plane of transcendence. Regarding the wild man, even with efforts we could not indicate a confrontation between individuals, since, in addition to the absence of positive law, individuation still requires a long development (of passions, virtual features, consciousness, imagination, etc.), before perfecting itself as "*moi relatif*". And if the "savage" of the "nascent society" finds himself already introduced to this individuation – with the emergence of morality, comparisons, the feeling of esteem, prestige, in short, self-love –, the absence of material determinism does not dissipate the bloodthirsty ferocity. This ferocity refers to the immanent plane, to properly social anthropological dispositions, and not to the destiny traced by mythological teleology. In other words, the subordination of the history of passions to myth is also ignored.<sup>17</sup>

The interpretative conflict derives from the exegesis that first and foremost referenced the goodness of the "savage" through pre-adamic goodness (Certeau, 1975, p. 231). Before the "fall", evil already existed, even if not incarnate. But, in the state of nature, evil is banned, just as much as the good that is dialectically opposed to it. Not even Hobbes – whose subtleties, in this regard, escape a good number of Rousseauists – would accept the pure overlap of these elements in the state of nature. It is a suspension of morality, not in the sense of an "*epokhè*", as a suspension of judgment, but in the sense that history itself has not yet erected its primary web: the cycle of sociability, once erased from its origin, gives way to the historically indeterminate course of perfectibility, which follows the order of contingency. As "this one who has never reflected can be neither merciful, nor just, nor sorrowful: he cannot even be evil or vengeful", says Rousseau (EOL, OC V, p. 395-396). The natural man is good,

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. the work *Fragments sur la guerre* (I) which make up the work *Écrits sur l'Abbé de Saint-Pierre* (OC III, p.613).

<sup>17</sup> Which, in fact, expresses a middle ground between love of self and self-love; in that sense, cf. V. Goldschmidt (2019, p. 442-451, 452-457) and J.-F. Spitz, (2015, p. 124 sqq.).

but evil has not acquired moral expression, it remains enclosed in the most basic order of affections that oppose physical pleasure, the feeling of preservation. And if early man lives in the “golden century”, it is, however, a “time of barbarism”, where goodness does not attest to perfection, nor to an exotic utopia inherited from conquerors, missionaries or travellers. But what is most important to highlight is that this “golden century” follows another historical path, different from that other teleological.

Rousseau’s theory of natural goodness affirms, against Hobbes, a disposition, or better yet, an anthropological principle (“*pitié naturelle*”) as a condition and principle of the use of relational freedom, which precedes the consciousness of “freedom-perfectibility” and prepares, by far, the contractual understanding of freedom in the registration of political law, duly reconsidered in its registration differences. And the goodness of man in “savage” societies affirms the value of freedom beyond the idealization of unconditional peace. Violence, cruelty, even if not affected by a field of material interest, do not match the space-time closure of the sacred. This does not mean, however, that the actions, – using a terminology from the tradition of natural law –, degenerate in the face of primary reason, are the same as those of civil man. Interest constitutes the field of evil. As Deleuze says (in his article “Jean-Jacques Rousseau précurseur de Kafka, de Céline et de Ponge”), there is no such thing as “disinterested evil” (2002, p. 74).

But what do we have with this moral suspension, in the first state of nature, if not a methodological principle? Or rather, the tip of the logical line of the theory of natural goodness. This same principle applies and complicates the understanding of the “early times”. As noted by V. Goldschmidt, it is not enough to differentiate two periods, one of the earliest times and the other of “savage” societies. The alleged myth of an “eternal spring” is due, in particular, to the characteristic of a space-time suspension in absolute indetermination (which is in itself a contradiction, as mythical indeterminacy is never absolute). The apparent confusion is therefore located between: on the one hand, Rousseau’s systematic application of the “diverse circumstances in which these people found themselves” (FP, OC III, p. 529), in order to understand the conditioning of men in relation to the “variety of climate”, as an enabler of distinct worlds (*idem*, p. 531); and, on the other hand, the unity of the wild man in the *second Discourse*, which, in its embryonic stage, would find itself in a kind of total suspension: “There was neither education nor progress, the generations multiplied uselessly” (DI, OC III , P. 160). This characteristic is the one that most strongly refers to the myth of origins, and can also be extracted from the *Essay* (OC V, p. 395).

In the embryonic stage, the wild man does not make any type of comparison, everything happens in complete and perfect uniformity. What is missing, with this uniformity, are – noted by V. Goldschmidt (2019, p. 235) – “the varieties of climates and the changes [...] that transform the face of the earth”. We would add, to this regular homogeneity, the exclusion of the relationship with things, or rather, its maximum reduction. However, the problem persists when we realize that the first note of chapter IX of the *Essay*, referring to the presence of the families, forces us to take as contemporary the descriptions of the first part of the *second Discourse* and that of the *Essay* (*idem*, p. 235-236). To resolve the impasse that arises, “one must understand the description of the First Part of the *second Discourse* as a method procedure” (*idem*, p. 238), even if it arguably characterizes a general index of the myth.

However, methodological understanding, that is, the understanding that Rousseau methodologically establishes distinct stages in the formation of natural man, presents strong elements to combat the interpretation of the myth itself. First of all, because the succession of stages is not typical of myth – at least not in the ordinary sense, of a progression or logical-descriptive chain, the diachronic and anachronic meanings can reverse and even enter into synchrony without embarrassment. Myth is characterized by perpetual uniformity, unchanging even in the face of possible cyclical variations, as its metaphysical principle of not changing, only remodelling the action that is subordinate to it. A parallel can be established with Plato's work, *Statesman*. In time or in the era of Zeus, there is no consequential, empirical logic, so that man can even age in the opposite direction, becoming a child. Time comes and goes in the opposite direction. While the myth of Kronos, with its era, that is, when time and generation regain their historical meaning, serves, above all, to mark the abandonment of supersensitive determination.

Rousseau uses the lexicon of myth, but to dilute it in the course of history that follows its “revolutions”, or rather, that follows the developments of perfectibility. H. Gouhier (1984, p. 19) had verified the “non-mythical perspective” of genetic historicity; but, the temptation to approach the myth prevails, and the specialist forges an understanding, in order to “obtain the myth”, of a border crossing between the observation of ethnographic data and philosophical analysis, without worrying about what it is proper to the myth, and without establishing in detail the terms of this passage.

Briefly, we could inscribe the main characteristics of the myth into two blocks: the first, with the sacred content that guides, substantiates and structures its principles, as well as its narrative; and the second, with the closure of time and space. In opposition to this closure, Rousseau subjects the state of

nature, beyond the primary uniformity, to a time of revolutions: all indeterminism is immanent. Every effect of historical development is due to the historical process of socialization and the development of passions. There is no synchrony with the principles of a parallel, transcendent, timeless history. In the methodology of the theory of man, these two stages bifurcate in consideration of internal processes (development of virtual faculties and passions), on the one hand, and external ones (relationship with animals, with other men, with things), on the other hand, the very first stage of space-time indetermination serves, in this historicity, to decant human passions and their relationships. This is the task of the theory of passions: "To properly follow the history of the human race – writes Rousseau in his compiled work *Fragments politiques* –, to correctly judge the formation of peoples and their revolutions, one must return to the principles of men's passions" (OC III, p. 529).<sup>18</sup>

Rousseau seeks, with his experimental methodology (articulating observation, reflection and verification), "the general causes that [...] make men act" (*idem*). The indeterminate time and space of the state of nature therefore appear in a kind of laboratory of passions (Goldschmidt, 2019, p. 233-234). It is a laboratory, experimental need to think about man in his comprehensiveness (closer to the completeness of Leibniz's primitive number, than to a "mythical image of the absolute individual"), in his space-time independence. The appeal, however, is only valid at this moment of exposure of the baseline of the natural man.<sup>19</sup>

From this methodology, what is extracted, beyond the surface reference to myth, are the principles of what *Émile* calls a kind of "experimental physics", as opposed to "speculative studies" (OC IV, p. 370). The wild man, in the style of Lucretius's solitary man (*De rer. nat.*, V), is not willing to manipulate a playwright expounding the odyssey of the senses (be it in the style of Buffon, Diderot or Condillac); it acquires corporeality, reality. The path opened by Rousseau – in open conflict with Hobbes and the authors of the natural law tradition – does not follow that of the myths, no matter how much one wants to bring it closer to a "legal version of the myth" (Terrasse, 1970, p. 85). Not only for methodological or rhetorical reasons, but in view of theoretical consistency itself. The truth of myth and theology are circumscribed in a well-defined field of human needs and interests, which find their

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<sup>18</sup> On this extract, refer to the comments by V. Goldschmidt (2019, p. 162-163) and by R. Derathé (OC III, p. 1533). For a more complete view of this theory, refer to M. Rueff (2018).

<sup>19</sup> Defended in the article "Le sauvage et le citoyen – le mythe des origines dans le système de Rousseau" by Y. Touchefeu (1989, p. 183).

justification in the record of the fictitious, the fable<sup>20</sup>; thus, theology and myth are often confused in interpretations.<sup>21</sup>

Even though, with the wild man and his correlative “conceptual terrain”, the pure state of nature, it is an abstract man and a non-existent state, inscribed in the conjectural, hypothetical record, Rousseau seeks to cover him with the maximum possible reality. This is the consistency that fills and forges the concept (Althusser, 2015), with a truth, undoubtedly paradoxical in appearance, that was based on the hypothesis: the state of nature, as said in the preface to the *second Discourse*, reduced to its “true state” (OC III, p. 123).

Let us remember that Pufendorf also made reference to a state of nature abandoned by God, where man, fallen from the clouds, is equal to the animal, wild, naked, solitary; but he considers it this way only to denounce its inauthenticity, its pagan derivation, as we read in the second chapter of book II, in the first volume of his *De iure naturae et gentium* of 1672. Whereas, in Rousseau, the unfolding of the origin is not the double of a false origin (Althusser, 2015, p. 97), it is the establishment of a truth about the historical untruth about the fact. In this cunning construction of a conjectural truth, historical facts are also removed from the plane of their historicity, because such facts, when distorted by historians, have something in common with the fabricating activity of myths. Rousseau invariably reveals and captures the field of intentions. The field of interests that hide themselves behind a myth, a creed or even a hypothesis, find no reason to exist there.<sup>22</sup>

But, let us return to the debate on the mythical interpretation regarding the “nascent societies”. M. Eigeldinger (1978, p. 100), by bypassing the characteristics that prevent the idealization of a perfect stage, linked to the time and space of the sacred, he contents himself with highlighting that savages find themselves in the period “where happiness is experienced in the complementarity of the conquest of a measure, in the joy of freedom”; and when he inevitably must confront the Rousseauian characterization

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<sup>20</sup> Regarding the proximity and appropriation of mythology by theology, refer to *Les sciences humaines et la pensée occidentale V – Dieu, la nature, l'homme au siècle des Lumières* de G. Gusdorf (1972), especially topic III of chapter V of the first part.

<sup>21</sup> Like the one in Y. Touchefeu (1989, p. 190), which brings the “primitive myth” closer to the “presence of the Creator”.

<sup>22</sup> Unlike the man that Linnaeus makes fall from the moon, naked but with a capacity for judgement; refer to “La curiosité naturelle” (1748), in *L'équilibre de la nature*, by Linnaeus (1972, p. 125).

that eludes the idyllic, the commentator manipulates the data in a description that appears, at the very least, as euphemistic, limiting himself to pointing out that “the passions of love engender jealousy and [...] men acquire a kind of civility and move towards inequality” (*idem*, p. 99). However, Rousseau emphatically points out that in the period of nascent societies “revenges were terrible, and men were bloodthirsty and cruel” (DI, OC III, p. 170). There is, therefore, no economy in the characterization: the myth must, along with any shadow of idealization that accompanies it, be distanced. The characteristic, or rather, the anthropological quality that attracts Rousseau – when he conceptually articulates “savage” societies and nascent societies – is consistent with the primitive dispositions that are found in all men who are not completely denatured.

If the nascent society finds itself in a state corresponding to the youth of the world, it cannot be forgotten that it is during this period that “the terror of revenge takes the place of the brake of laws” (*idem*, p. 170-171). Thus, the emerging society presents us with “the advantage of initially refusing the myth, so to speak, that lends Rousseau the ‘myth of the noble savage’”, because – continues V. Goldschmidt (2019, p. 448-449) – “the savage [...] appears neither as a myth nor as a ‘dream’”: the “description of the ‘bloodthirsty and cruel’ savage has nothing idyllic about it”. In short, the new social and moral configuration of nascent societies produces elements “harmful to society and innocence” (*idem*), even if still far from the intentional perversity of civil man.

When we find that the interpretation made by M. Eigeldinger’s *Grammatologie* was hasty, we want to say that, no matter how much Derrida talks about a time before time, he is not actually referring to the space and time of the sacred, nor to a mythical indeterminacy. Derrida (1967, p. 357) deals with the first stage of the early times as fictitious, as it is evidently an abstraction, but which is not, however, submissive to the transcendent structure of myth, but rather to the theoretical development of the theory of man, of its historicity which, despite conjectural, proceeds by observation and confirmation.

On this theoretical level, as so many commentators would like, there is neither pessimism nor optimism, but a “logic” achieved through an experimental methodology. As Deleuze infers, in relation to the goodness of the wild man, this is not optimism, but an “extremely precise logical manifesto” (2002, p. 73). The same reasoning applies to the detours of perfectibility: there is no pessimism, but a logical perception of the unstoppable development of this feature, with the increase in needs and an inconsequential denaturation. This does not mean that Rousseau conceives of his historicity as a

teleological determination: the "accidental" character of his historicity rules out any form of a prior finalism.

It would be discrepant, with the methodology used, especially in the *second Discourse*, if the philosopher structured the principles of his anthropology on myth in its variants, as it would be the same as establishing, antagonistically, his scientific basis on the fluctuating consistency of the sacred, which is effective drastically with the imposition and appropriation of interests. The moral background is different. If the intention of genetic historicity followed other paths, there is no doubt that it would be a blatant convenience to have used the theological matrix to conceive the original, natural man. However, the sacred takes a secondary place in the theory of man (whether in the *second Discourse*, in the *Essay* or in the *Letter to Chr. de Beaumont*, for example).

We could, by way of conclusion, establish a parallel with the distinction that Jean-Pierre Vernant makes between myth and philosophical thought emerging in ancient Greece (6th-5th centuries BC). Objectively or subjectively, the myth bases a truth, being itself a guiding element of that truth. If Rousseau's philosophy is a tireless and laborious search for truth, it must be remembered that this truth, in the anthropological record, is not the same as that postulated by myth in general, which always depends on the intervention of "supernatural beings" (Eliade, 1963, p. 15). But, as it would be for the ancient Greeks, an "open truth, accessible to all and which bases its criteria of validity on its own demonstrative force" (Vernant, 1990, p. 380). Because, on the theoretical level of genetic historicity, "the formal rigor of demonstration" prevails, in the search to establish "its truth value" (*idem*), even if on a hypothetical level.

### III

We conclude then that: (i) the wild man does not protect with the myth, anything more than a surface reference, given that the embryonic stage of space-time uniformity reveals a methodological need (laboratory and experimental), which unfolds at the hypothetical level, therefore, entirely disconnected from the establishment of a sacred time and space; (ii) the "savages" of the nascent societies could not, equally, be understood through the mythical record, because their social and moral characteristics (including all the ferocity and violence resulting from the first developments of self-love) prevent the understanding of the idyllic, of immaculate perfection, etc.; (iii) there is, finally, no myth of the "noble savage" in relation to the "savages of America", as it these are the societies that lend primitive and social

dispositions to the nascent societies. The freedom and balance of perfectibility praised in this period are not idealizations, but qualities measured in relation to the state of degeneration of civil man.

Meditation on the "savage" follows the paths of observation, equating anthropological similarities and differences, in the search to filter the "primitive dispositions" to establish the natural constitution of man, but also to modify the data of experience itself, improving it to perfection within in the concept. And the objective is none other than the formulation of the theory of natural goodness. Much more than supplanting the tainted existence – evident in the violent actions of the solipsistic "savage" or those equipped with sociality – the mythification of the savage, in its variants, would disadvantageously impede the proper development of the theory of natural goodness. The myth would co-opt them into a domain that, in truth, characterizes dependence on transcendence. They project outward what Rousseau strove to bring inward. Such a determination is dogmatic in nature, and dissipates any effort made to support an entirely anthropological goodness. Just as evils do not have causes that are external to man himself, goodness is also immanent to him (self-love, natural piety). Without realizing what is really at stake, in the theoretical background, and without paying attention to the methodological development, it was possible to lend a mythical consistency, which challenges, inevitably and at the same time, the epistemological nature that supports the systematic usage of the "savages" and the great commitment of their anthropology, with the defence of the theory of natural goodness: avatar of natural and civil freedom.

*Translation by J. P. Duarte Diniz.*

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