Introduction: in which the author briefly explains his aims

> On a coutume de s'étonner que l'esprit humain soit si infini dans ses combinaisons et ses portées; j'avouerais bien bas que je m'étonne qu'il le soit si peu.
>
> C. A. Sainte-Beuve, *Portraits littéraires*[1]

Custom requires famous scholars to be depicted alongside their preferred instruments of observation: Copernicus with an astrolabe in his hand, Galileo looking through a telescope, Pasteur bending intently over a microscope. In the common-sense imaginary, the scientist is first and foremost an observer of the world, and all his knowledge can proceed only from observation.

The history and sociology of science have importantly rectified this naïve picture, by demonstrating that scientific thought is subject not only to the force of the empirical[2] but also, and sometimes even more so, to social constraints. However, are empirical and social elements sufficient to explain the content of scientific theories? Can scholarly knowledge be reduced to the results of a more or less complicated interplay between 'facts' and various 'social' factors, such as fashionable theories, paradigms, ideologies and power relations within the scientific community? It seems the answer must be negative, for although the empirical and the social may explain why the scientist favours a particular conception to the detriment of some other, this does not tell us how the ideas, whether accepted or rejected, are formed, and why they are as they are. Imagination is the true source of scientific theories.

But what kind of imagination? One deemed appropriate for modern art: free, indomitable, allied to pure fantasy? Or one described by Emile Zola: disciplined, exploring the territory conquered by science,

[1] Sainte-Beuve 1951/1852, II: 466.

[2] The term empirical has two main meanings today: in everyday language it means knowledge that remains on the spontaneous or common-sense level; in philosophy, it is applied to knowledge founded on experience or on factual data. It will be used here systematically in the second sense.

and resorting to intuition only when faced with the unknown, clearing the way for science? The answer is neither of these types of imagination, both invented, illusory, mere creations of a third type of imagination, the only one that really exists. This imagination, familiar to ethnologists, is not a faculty that enables us to step outside the conceptual box in which we are confined; on the contrary, it actually creates the box itself, and it is inside its enclosed space that – as Paul Veyne says[3] – religions and literatures are moulded, as are politics, behaviours and theories. The sides of this conceptual box, while not eternal and unchanging, can nevertheless remain fixed over long periods of time and often seem so transparent that we are not even aware of their existence, just like a fly that keeps coming up against a glass pane and remains oblivious of the obstacle.

We have already learnt to study the boxes of others, those distant from us in space or time: this is done very skilfully by ethnologists and by historians. But would the fly itself be able to study the invisible pane which impedes its own flight? In taking up such a challenge, the author, an anthropologist by training, has been quite naturally concerned with the conditioning undergone by the imagination of the academic tribe of which he is part. The problem of origins of humanity and culture, constantly pondered over millennia, provides a convenient opportunity for reconstructing a naïve anthropology widely accepted in western culture. This may enable us to retrace the influence exerted by this shadowy knowledge on present-day scholarly thought.

But let there be no mistake. My intention is not to disparage anthropological thinking, but rather to understand it and to explain some of its mechanisms. In such a task, a critical approach is often as useful as it is natural and inevitable; we must not forget that the methodical exercise of doubt is the very essence of scientific thought. To the reader who may find too much scepticism here, I dedicate the ironic recollection which Giovanni Giacomo Casanova (who was also a witty man of letters) had of his first tutor: 'He said that nothing was more uncomfortable than uncertainty, and for that reason he condemned thought because it engendered doubt.'[4]

[3] Veyne 1983: 12. [4] Casanova 1986/1826–38: 43.

CHAPTER 1

Prehistory and the conditioned imagination

THE INVENTION OF PREHISTORY

> On n'ouvre pas un livre de voyages où l'on ne trouve des descriptions de caractères et de mœurs: mais on est tout étonné d'y voir que ces gens qui ont tant décrit de choses, n'ont dit que ce que chacun savoit déjà.
>
> J.-J. Rousseau, 'Discourse sur l'origine de l'inégalité' [1]

What is conventionally known as the 'discovery' of America presented Europeans with a world they rapidly christened New. The first descriptions of this world were in no way new however, so much so that today they provide us with one of the most astonishing testimonies of the power by which a conceptual tradition conditions the observation of new phenomena. Throughout the century following Columbus' first expedition, the conquistadors and colonisers remained strongly attached to everything that had previously been imagined concerning the existence of some possible other world; the first representations of America were therefore inspired by images that preceded its discovery.[2] The River Amazon was so called by Carvajal because, he asserted, women similar to those described by Homer had fought heroically against Orellana's soldiers at the mouth of the Rio Negro. The freakish Ewaipanomas, depicted by Raleigh as having eyes on their shoulders and mouths between their breasts, came straight out of Pliny's *Natural History*, having adorned many of the fanciful geographies of 'Ethiopia', Asia and the Far East. Towns and exploits that had figured in the tales of chivalry, Old Testament prophecies, Greco-Roman myths – such as that of Atlantis and of the Hesperides – catalogues of fantastic bestiaries, medieval legends like the kingdom of Prester John, all were in turn transplanted to American soil, thus colouring these ancient reveries with a semblance of reality. No

[1] Rousseau 1973/1755: 416–17, note 10. [2] Ainsa 1989: 111.

conventional attribute of the wonderful or the remote was to be missing from the accounts of these men when they penetrated further and further into the interior of the new continent in search of the mythical El Dorado.[3] 'That other world', comments Claude Kappler, 'is new only in the sense that it had never been visited before. For it had in fact existed for centuries in Tradition: Columbus evokes the Greeks and Romans. What was sought for was something "known" that had never been seen.'[4] In this respect, the discoverers of the New World remind us of the first explorers who, a few centuries later, would set off in search of prehistory.

'The unknown surrounds the scientist who ventures into the ocean of prehistoric ages': Emile Cartailhac's remark, written in 1889, is redolent of adventure, with all the romance and the unpredictability that it conjures.[5] The science of prehistory had only just been born, but already the unknown evoked by Cartailhac was thoroughly relative: the traditional view of the human past projected from the very outset a curious light on everything that met the pioneers' eyes. The most eloquent examples of this – because of their simplicity – date from the eighteenth century. When John Bagford in 1715 reported the discovery in London of a biface tool beside the molar of a mastodon, it seemed obvious to him that this could only be the spearhead of an Ancient Briton, lying with the remains of an elephant brought to the Island by the legions of the Emperor Claudius.[6] In a similar vein, the mammoth tusks uncovered in Siberia at the same period were often interpreted as the remains of elephants that had reached north either with an invading Greek or Roman army, or carried there by the biblical Flood.[7] In both cases, enigmatic fossils have been easily fitted into the framework of a pre-established view of the past; a past considered as known, familiar and domesticated, made up of biblical themes and references to ancient history.[8]

The tendency to explain new phenomena in terms of traditional concepts can be seen with the same clarity in the discovery of prehistory as in that of America, but an important difference precludes pushing this analogy too far. Voyages across the Atlantic were preceded by countless 'dream peregrinations' which made of America a confused reflection of imaginary prefigurations of the 'Antipodes'. The New World was thus invented before it was discovered, whereas prehistory seems at first sight to have emerged out of nothing: at the time of the first discoveries, all

[3] Eliade 1973: 569; Mahn-Lot 1970: 90; Greenblatt 1991. [4] Kappler 1980: 54.
[5] Cartailhac 1889: iii. [6] J. Bagford's text, published in 1715, is reproduced in Capitan 1901.
[7] E.g. Breyne 1741. See also Cohen 1994: chapter 4.
[8] A study of cases illustrating this mechanism can be found in Stoczkowski 1993.

that existed was the scene on which biblical and ancient events were played out. Interpreters of the tradition asserted that the world and humanity were created but a few millennia ago, and that History was fully accounted for in the Bible and in the texts of classical Antiquity. It seems that there was apparently no room in the western imagination for a dreamed prehistory, which preceded the discovery of traces of the real prehistory. The first non-mythical conception of human existence before History would be that put forward by archaeologists and geologists, arising from a void to replace the religious dogmas. 'Attempts to explain human origins', certain palaeoanthropologists say today, 'go back at least several thousand years, but only in the past hundred years or so have scientific methods begun to make headway against mythical and theological versions of creation.'[9]

According to this point of view, scientists set out to conquer a prehistoric past that had been recently rediscovered. Having as their only enemy the errors of religious beliefs, all they had to do was to choose: either they could reject the biblical Genesis, which might ultimately be transformed into an allegory of obscure significance, or they could adopt a hostile stance towards the naturalist view, in defence of the Christian doctrine.

Many pages have been written on the role of prehistory and palaeontology in the conflict between science and religion. We are not going to linger here over that question, although it deserves a much more thorough analysis than it usually receives. This is to emphasise that the biblical narrative still frequently passes for the only imaginary prefiguration of the origins of man produced by western culture before science seized the issue. For many, the burgeoning naturalist view, which collided head on with that of the book of Genesis, was developed in a kind of conceptual vacuum, and the imagination of the scientists had been thus free of the kind of conditioning that had influenced the first explorers of America.

The habit of reducing scientists' statements on the subject of prehistory to mere inferences from archaeological data seems to be one of the considerable consequences of this view of the beginning of prehistoric research: since all knowledge derives from the empirical, the empirical should explain everything. It is easy to accept that in order to understand conquistadors' accounts of men with their mouths between their breasts, even the most profound knowledge of sixteenth-century

[9] Zihlman and Lowenstein 1983: 677.

Amazonian peoples is insufficient. On the other hand, the knowledge of archaeological and palaeontological remains is deemed sufficient to explain what scholars say about the origins of man, and these vestiges are constantly invoked whenever differences and controversies arise in the numerous debates of prehistorians and palaeontologists.

But the naturalist conception of the origins of humankind and culture did not emerge like a *deus ex machina* thanks to the first discoveries of the material remains of the prehistoric past. It is true that the scientific view of anthropogenesis is, up to a point, the fruit of those discoveries, but it is not satisfactorily explained by them in its totality. In order to understand its distinctive features and its peculiar logic, we have to reconstruct an 'imaginary' prehistory that preceded the blossoming of scientific prehistory and yet did not belong in the domain of religious thought. To grasp the anthropological interest of this recourse to history, we could start with a detour that compels us first of all to go 'back to school'.

WHAT EVERY SCHOOLCHILD KNOWS

In primary school, we learn that 'only archaeological excavations... enable us to know about the life of prehistoric people'.[10] Oddly enough, schoolbooks promptly make the explanation suspect by putting forward a host of conjectures and explanations which can hardly be derived from the modest material remains spared by time and discovered by the archaeologist through excavations.

Not surprising, you may say: the distortions that schoolbooks purvey are well known. Historians, ethnologists and sociologists have already shown that history as taught in school is often swayed by the demands of ideologies, fashions and local intellectual traditions.[11] But what is true of the teaching of historical periods is not necessarily true of prehistory. It is surprising to find that conceptions of prehistory in school manuals display a remarkable uniformity from one country to another, even though views of historical periods may differ widely. It might perhaps be tempting to conclude that ancient and little-known times are not a fertile ground for ideological didacticism, and therefore that prehistory is spared, presenting the same objective image everywhere. But to assume that an image is objective merely because it is shared seems to jump to unwarranted conclusions. And such is indeed the case: prehistorians recognised long ago

[10] Milza *et al.* 1970: 12; also Korovkin 1974: 8; Bazylevic *et al.* 1954: 5; Ourman *et al.* 1986: 6; Gralhon 1975: 7; Chambon and Pouliqueu 1986: 7.
[11] E.g. Ferro 1981; Stomma 1988.

that schoolbooks deviate from scientific knowledge.[12] The striking convergences between the views of prehistory presented in Spain, France, Germany, Great Britain and Eastern Europe are thereby rendered more interesting: everything leads us to think that this widely shared representation is a pervasive social fact. Its analysis offers us therefore a priceless opportunity to reconstitute the knowledge that we have been innocently imbibing from very early childhood. The view of the Palaeolithic, the period considered to be that of human and cultural origins, will be the main subject of my analysis.[13] I shall restrict it to schoolbooks from France and the former Soviet Union, chosen to represent two poles of European tradition.

Genesis according to schoolbooks

Palaeolithic people are presented to children as the embodiment of our first ancestors. Starting with a description of the natural environment, all the schoolbooks paint the same picture of prehistoric life. Soviet children learn, as do French children, that it was very cold then and that nature was hostile, teeming with savage animals: 'The mountains and caves sheltered the most fearsome enemies of men – lions, bears and hyena.'[14] Our earliest ancestors roamed the sinister 'icy desert'[15] inhabited by wild beasts actively seeking human flesh, or at the very least threatening, if only because of their huge size.

It is easy to guess the unenviable fate of people living in such a terrifying world. Indeed, schoolbooks provide a spectacle full of dread. Our ancestors led a difficult existence, exposed to the constant dangers of cold and hunger. Fear was their daily companion, death stalked them: 'Some perished under the claws of predators, others – from disease and cold.'[16] So they were all doomed to atrocious suffering and their lives were necessarily reduced to the most basic needs: 'People had one concern only – the search for food.'[17] Hence the descriptions of desperate, starving bands roaming about in a wearisome quest for prey.

The schoolbooks are unanimous in stressing that the Palaeolithic was the period of human origins. It was then that humankind 'learnt', 'began',

[12] E.g. Perlès 1984.

[13] Given the strong resemblances between the first chapters of history books in every country, we can restrict our analysis to a few French and Soviet schoolbooks, representing two traditions fairly remote from each other: USSR: Korovkin 1974; Nieckina and Lejbengrub 1984; Bazylevic *et al.* 1952; France: Milza, Bernstein and Gauthier 1970; Ourman *et al.* 1986; Vincent *et al.* 1986; Gralhon 1986.

[14] Bazylevic *et al.* 1954: 4. [15] Nieckina and Lejbengrub 1984: 8. [16] Korovkin 1974: 14.

[17] Gralhon 1975: 10; see also Ourman *et al.* 1986: 12.

'discovered', 'noticed', 'invented' – these are the verbs that punctuate their narratives. In particular, humankind 'learnt' to make tools, to master fire, to live in groups and to build shelters. Occasionally added to this list are clothmaking and the invention of religion and magic. So the list comprises technology, social organisation and religion – in short, culture. It is the origin of culture that the schoolbooks set out to explain. Let us then examine the 'causal' relations put forward to elucidate the origin of tools, of the use of fire, of social organisation and of religion, not just in order to criticise their assuredly frequent inaccuracies or to poke fun at their very flagrant naïveté: these inaccuracies and naïvetés are interesting in so far as they reveal the tacit principles that govern the commonsense view of prehistory and give it great coherence.

We shall start with the origin of tools, explanations for which are highly consistent. Here are a few examples:

> Men did not have powerful paws, or claws and teeth as strong as those of the big ferocious animals. But a tool was harder than teeth and claws, and a blow with a club more fearsome than a blow from a bear's paw.[18]

> In order to defend themselves more effectively, men made weapons and tools.[19]

> The axe . . . increased their strength tenfold.[20]

So our forebears would have started making tools simply because they were exposed to attacks from powerful animals and because nature had denied them the weapons with which other creatures were endowed. To confront an animal in the struggle for survival, our ancestor was obliged to 'increase his strength tenfold'; the tool became an extension of his body, a substitute for claws and teeth.

The origin of the mastery of fire is explained along similar lines:

> However, people noticed that this awesome fire could also be a loyal friend: it gave warmth in bad weather and protection against carnivorous animals . . . At night, ferocious beasts dared not attack people sitting round a fire.[21]

> Fire – was of major importance. Without fire men risked dying of cold . . . The use of fire made the life of men easier. They could warm themselves at the hearth and protect themselves from the cold; with the help of fire they could ward off wild animals.[22]

> Fire was in demand because it lighted the cave, putting the bears to flight.[23]

[18] Korovkin 1974: 12. [19] Ourman *et al.* 1986: 12. [20] Milza *et al.* 1970: 13.
[21] Korovkin 1974: 13. [22] Nieckina and Lejbengrub 1984: 8–9. [23] Milza *et al.* 1970: 13.

This amazing discovery would bring them warmth and light, but also a means of defence against wild beasts who are in fear of fire.[24]

Protection against cold or fierce beasts is the common point of all these rationalisations. As in the case of tools, the use of fire is explained by the postulated conditions of the natural environment: cold and the menace of animals.

Schoolbooks devote a lot of space to explaining the origins of social life. Here too we find highly repetitive formulae:

The first men could not live a solitary existence: they wouldn't have been able to get food or preserve fire. They would have died of hunger or become the prey of ferocious beasts.[25]

People lived and worked in groups. This was very important. They would have perished if they had lived alone. They wouldn't have been able either to defend themselves against wild beasts or to find food.[26]

Having only a club, a hunting spear and rudimentary tools at their disposal, men couldn't struggle alone against a hostile nature and carnivorous beasts. Danger lurked at every step. It was only by cooperation that men were able to defend themselves against attacks by animals and acquire essential food.[27]

To protect themselves against cold, these people lived in groups.[28]

Men grouped together for hunting.[29]

Living in groups, according to the schoolbooks, was thus a necessity imposed by the constraints of the environment and the weakness of our ancestors, unable to survive without the constant assistance of their fellows.

The emergence of religion is commented on at length in the Soviet schoolbooks:

Man . . . experienced fear in the face of nature . . . Unable to understand the causes of natural phenomena, he explained them by the intervention of mysterious, supernatural forces . . . Religious beliefs prevented him from seeking the true explanation of natural phenomena.[30]

More than once man had found himself powerless in the struggle against nature, on which he was totally dependent. Fear of the menacing and incomprehensible forces of nature gave rise to a belief in the supernatural power of the spirits of nature and then a belief in gods. Religion was unable to provide a correct

[24] Vincent *et al.* 1986: 13. [25] Korovkin 1974: 14. [26] Nieckina and Lejbengrub 1984: 7–8.
[27] Bazylevic *et al.* 1952: 4–5. [28] Milza *et al.* 1970: 13. [29] Gralhon 1986: 8.
[30] Korovkin 1974: 12.

explanation of the phenomena of nature and of human life. It impeded the search for truth, leading man along a path where he could find neither instruction nor knowledge.[31]

French schoolbooks do not comment directly on the origin of religion but they devote some attention to the function of Palaeolithic art which, in their view, would have constituted one of the chief manifestations of Palaeolithic religion, frequently associated with magic:

> What, in fact, is the significance of the paintings of animals on the walls of the caves at Niaux, at Lascaux and at Altamira (Spain)? It was to ensure the success of the hunt: the animal to be killed was represented in as lifelike a way as possible, then it was killed with three arrows in the drawing. This cast a 'spell' which should ensure a fruitful hunt.[32]

> On the walls of their caves, 20,000 years ago, the men of Niaux and Pech-Merle drew the animals they hunted, perhaps in order to secure a more fruitful hunt.[33]

To explain the birth of religion, Soviet schoolbooks claim that 'feeble humans' invented religion as a solace, searching in the creations of their imagination for an escape from the fears inspired by a 'hostile nature'. Represented as primitive and unsound science, Palaeolithic religion assumes a utilitarian character. In France also, the emphasis put on the utilitarian function reduces art and magic to problems of subsistence. Art would thus have been so close to the elementary needs of Palaeolithic people that its principles seem to prefigure social realism: 'Man endeavoured to represent what he saw around him. Usually he depicted hunting which supplied food.'[34] So, in both France and Russia magic and religion are presented to pupils as a creation of hungry hunters trying to satisfy needs far removed from any cultural dimension.

Whatever the area of culture may be, its origins are accounted for by one rationalisation and one only: our ancestors created culture because they were cold, hungry and frightened. Moreover, the verb 'to create', suggesting inventiveness and a spirit of enterprise, does not appear. One should rather say: the first humans 'began' and 'learnt'. That being so, it was because they were constrained to 'begin' and 'learn'; otherwise they could not have survived.

The schoolbooks are not alone in propagating this view. Comic strips offer a similar picture of the life of our Palaeolithic forebears. In France this can be seen in a popular series narrating the fortunes of the young hunter Rahan. This 'son of the savage ages', a brawny blond, spends his

[31] Nieckina and Lejbengrub 1984: 12. [32] Milza *et al.* 1970: 14.
[33] Gralhon 1986: 8; see also Chambon and Pouliqueu 1986: 15. [34] Korovkin 1974: 18.