EXPLAINING HUMAN ORIGINS

Myth, Imagination and Conjecture

WIKTOR STOCZKOWSKI

Translated by Mary Turton

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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.

time fighting not only against wild beasts but also against the superstitions of the other inhabitants of the Earth, for the most part disagreeable individuals, dark and bloodthirsty. Scenes of primitive fighting abound, too, in the 'prehistoric novels' of H. G. Wells (1921),[35] E. Haraucourt (1914)[36] or J.-H. Rosny Aîné, whose best-known book *La guerre du feu* (1909),[37] is recommended as optional reading in both French and Soviet schools. Rosny Aîné's *romans préhistoriques* have recently benefited from the success of a movie version of *La guerre du feu*, by Jean-Jacques Annaud, who has not omitted a single one of the classic attributes of our pitiful origins.

This view is so widespread and so popular that we are tempted to consider it credible and vouched for by science. Although the authors of schoolbooks assure us that their picture of prehistory is the outcome of meticulous work by archaeologists, it is difficult to accept that prehistoric vestiges can justify such statements about a diabolically menacing nature, the feebleness of the first humans and the resulting origins of culture. The true sources of this vision must undoubtedly be sought outside archaeology.

THE PREHISTORY OF THE PHILOSOPHERS

In order to understand the roots of this view, we must consider a prehistory that predates the prehistorians, and go back to times when nobody yet suspected the wealth of material vestiges of the human past lying buried in geological strata. The second half of the eighteenth century, before the emergence of prehistory as an academic discipline, seems to be the ideal period for such a study, because a host of thinkers were then pondering on the life of the first humans and the origin of culture. This subject was of special interest to French and Scottish philosophers and it is to their writings that we shall turn our attention.

It is often thought that the 'noble savage' was one of the main characters in the anthropological conjectures of the Enlightenment. Indeed 'noble savages' then peopled the pages of travellers' narratives and philosophical treatises, in which descriptions of the virtues of 'primitives' jostle with criticism of those who are 'civilised'. However, even if the educated European of the day indulged in stern self-examination, he remained an optimist, often believed in progress and would have felt no great enthusiasm for a return to an original state of 'pure nature'. We must not

[35] Wells 1958/1929. [36] Haraucourt 1988/1914. [37] Rosny Aîné 1985.

confuse the view of Antipodean space with that of the times of our beginnings: Enlightenment's 'noble savages' are largely missing from theories of human origins – only Rousseau's *Second discourse* and its derivatives, as particular as they are ambivalent, might prove an exception.[38] In general, eighteenth-century philosophers and naturalists imagined human ancestors as devoid of culture and reduced to an animal life, in a way that is more redolent of the Enlightenment view of the orang-utan than of the supposedly happy peoples of the Antipodes.

In works of the eighteenth-century thinkers, the origin of culture usually opens up the history of humanity,[39] although this epoch of origin may be preceded by a more perfect,[40] even paradisal[41] kind of existence that ends in a cataclysm, reducing our species to the precultural state. So the history of culture starts, or restarts, from scratch. Let us stay with this view of the beginning, in order to study the attributes commonly ascribed then to the natural environment and to early human existence.

Buffon provides this image of our ancestors' environment: they 'were witnesses of the convulsive motions of the earth, which were then frequent and terrible. For a refuge against inundation they had nothing but the mountains, which they were often forced to abandon by the fire of volcanoes. They trembled on the ground which shook under their feet. Naked in mind as well as in body, exposed to the injuries of every element, victims to the rapacity of ferocious animals.'[42]

Similarly, Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger sketches a frightening picture of the nature in which the few survivors of the Flood lived: 'So it was a time when the wretched inhabitants of the earth had to look with disgust on their dwelling place, which was the scene of the most terrible catastrophes' and when man had 'so many legitimate reasons to hate a nature that denied him everything, that destroyed even his hut, that constantly alarmed him and satisfied hardly any of his needs'.[43] Voltaire, in his *Essai sur les mœurs*, says that in the beginning, 'carnivorous beasts . . . must have covered the earth and devoured a portion of the human species',[44] an opinion shared by James Burnet, who speaks of 'a time when the wild beasts disputed with us the empire of the earth'.[45]

[38] See Lovejoy 1948.

[39] Condorcet 1971/1793; Ferguson 1767; Holbach 1822/1773; Home 1774; Millar 1979/1771; Rousseau 1973/1755; Voltaire 1963/1756.

[40] Boulanger 1766.

[41] E.g. Burnet 1774–92; Court de Gébelin 1773–82; Goguet 1758; Turgot 1973/1750.

[42] Buffon 1778, trans. W. Smellie 1791, IX: 381. [43] Boulanger 1766, I: 367, 388.

[44] Voltaire 1963/1756, I: 10. [45] Burnet 1774–92, II: 385.

For the philosophers, original nature is as hostile as that imagined in the schoolbooks: inhospitable, menacing and full of fierce beasts with a taste for human flesh. The view our philosophers had of the way our ancestors lived also reminds us of the school image. Buffon presents the first humans 'penetrated with the common sentiment of terror and pressed by necessity'.[46] Boulanger conjures up 'a life of wretchedness and terror', 'the harsh and unbearable existence', 'the uncertain, anxious, wandering life' which plunges humankind into 'a profound melancholy'.[47] Holbach depicts primordial man as 'a child without resources, experience, reason or industry, continually suffering hunger and destitution, who finds himself constantly obliged to fight against wild animals'.[48] In *L'esprit des lois*, Montesquieu assumes that our ancestors experienced first and foremost 'a sense of their own weakness', which must inevitably have been allied with the distressing 'sense of their needs'.[49]

In this sad state, 'men were chiefly concerned with obtaining the means of survival and with going about the tasks directly essential to their existence'.[50] To satisfy those needs, they had to create culture. That is in a nutshell how the Enlightenment philosophers explain the origin of tools, of social life and of religion.

According to Voltaire, 'men could defend themselves against fierce animals only by hurling stones and arming themselves with great branches of trees'.[51] Stones and clubs would have been their first weapons, and primitive combat against a fierce animal is sufficient to explain their origin.[52] Helvétius settled for a similar argument when he tried to throw light on the origin of social life: 'men joined forces against the animals, their common enemies'.[53] James Burnet takes the same line: 'Another motive which I mentioned as inducing men to enter into society, was self-defence; the necessity of which will appear the greater if we consider two things: first, that man is by nature weaker and not so well armed as many of the beasts of prey, and secondly that he is the natural prey of all those beasts.'[54]

Broad justifications for the genesis of religion are particularly worthy of attention. This is what Holbach, a well-known atheist, wrote: 'understanding nothing of the forces of nature, they believed it to be animated by

[46] Buffon 1778, trans. W. Smellie 1791, IX: 381. [47] Boulanger 1766, I: 367, 388, 390.
[48] Holbach 1822/1773: 275. [49] Montesquieu 1979/1748: 126.
[50] *Ibid.*; see also Buffon 1825b/1778: 308; Boulanger, 1776, I: 378; Goguet 1758, I: 67; Millar 1979/1771: 224; Voltaire 1963/1756, I: 9, 11.
[51] Voltaire 1963/1756, I: 10. [52] See also Burnet 1774–92, I: 401.
[53] Quoted in Duchet 1971: 386.
[54] Burnet 1774–92, I: 384; see also Goguet 1758, I: 9; Rousseau 1973/1755: 72; Virey 1801, I: 113.

some great spirit. Men filled nature with spirits because they were almost always ignorant of the true causes.'[55] Voltaire appealed to introspection to support the same argument:

> In order to know how all these cults or superstitions became established, it seems to me that we must follow the march of the human spirit left to itself. A settlement of virtual savages sees the fruits that feed it die; a flood destroys some huts; others are burned by thunder. Who has done them this evil? It cannot be one of their fellow beings, because all have suffered equally: it must therefore be some secret power that has harmed them, so it must be appeased.[56]

This way of reasoning would be followed later by the authors of schoolbooks. The oppression of the first humans helps to explain the birth of religion, but religion's very existence is already seen as proof of our ancestors' misfortunes. Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger was convinced of this when he wrote: 'If men had been happy, they would have had no motive for thus plunging into sadness, their worship would have been made up of joy, of praise, of gratitude for the blessings of nature and admiration for the works of the Creator; they would not have invented thousands of devices to cast down the soul, to poison their days with perpetual weeping, and to make their existence miserable.'[57]

Thus, the philosophical vision of the 'earliest times' corresponds almost exactly to prehistory as taught in schools. Without embarking on research that would demand a thorough historical investigation into the possible influences of Enlightenment philosophy on today's schools programmes, we need only observe that both of these, separated by two centuries, mobilise the same stock of images to reconstruct the life of our first ancestors and the origin of culture.

It is possible, though more difficult, to retrace the history of this imagery by going further back in time. In Lucretius' poem *De rerum natura* (first century BC) we find a conception whose principal lines are curiously similar. Here is how the philosopher-poet imagined the existence of the earliest humans:

> But what gave them trouble was rather the races of wild beasts which would often render repose fatal to the poor wretches. And, driven from their home, they would flee from their rocky shelters on the approach of a foaming boar or a strong lion . . . They would . . . shelter in the brushwood their squalid limbs when driven to shun the buffetings of the winds and rains.[58]

So humans led a miserable existence, 'wandering terror stricken'.[59] 'It was a necessity that mortal men . . . should have been able to denote

[55] Holbach 1821/1770: 123. [56] Voltaire 1963/1756, I: 13. [57] Boulanger 1766, I: 367.
[58] Lucretius, trans. Munro 1900: 140. [59] *Ibid.*: 139.

dissimilar things by many different words';[60] it was necessity too that drove people to live in society, 'or else the race of man would have been wholly cut off'.[61]

These few quotations are enough to testify to a striking resemblance between the ancient poem, the conjectures of the Enlightenment and today's schoolbooks: a hostile nature with its share of aggressive animals, the pitiful condition of the earliest humans, and the pragmatic genesis of culture created by elementary need. The opinions of Lucretius on religion and its origins also resemble those that would mark the Enlightenment philosophy and modern common sense: 'And now what cause has ... implanted in mortals a shuddering awe which raises new temples of the gods?'[62] Lucretius explained it by the action of imagination which presented people with images of perfect beings, but, chiefly, by ignorance: 'They would see the system of heaven and the different seasons of the year come round in regular succession and could not find out by what causes this was done; therefore they would seek a refuge in handing over all things to the gods.'[63] That, he says, is how religion was born, 'subjugating' people by a kind of 'superstitious terror'. And the Roman poet exclaims pathetically: 'O hapless race of men, when that they charged the gods with such acts and coupled with them bitter wrath! What groaning did they beget for themselves, what wounds for us, what tears for our children's children!'[64]

We are often reminded that Lucretius' poem was favourite reading of Enlightenment philosophers. A study of the relations – rich in borrowings, reworkings and transformations – interwoven between Antiquity and the eighteenth century would require a separate and more far-reaching survey than the limited ambitions of my undertaking. Suffice it to say that Lucretius, still republished in large printruns in our own day, was not the only ancient author whose texts, in the eighteenth century, provided ideas useful to feed the conjectural reconstructions of miserable human origins. We can find different ingredients of this vision in the second century BC in Polybius,[65] in the first century BC in Diodorus Siculus,[66] Vitruvius[67] and Cicero.[68] Later, in the fourth century, they would re-emerge in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa[69] and Nemesius;[70] a belated medieval trace appears in the eleventh century with the Byzantine monk Tzetzes.[71] Fierce beasts threatening the first humans is, moreover, a widespread motif in ancient literature from the fifth century

[60] *Ibid.*: 142. [61] *Ibid.*: 141. [62] *Ibid.*: 144. [63] *Ibid.*: 145. [64] *Ibid.*: 145.
[65] Polybius 1921, book VI. [66] Diodorus Siculus 1737: 18. [67] Vitruvius 1834, book II.1.
[68] *De republica*, reproduced in Lovejoy and Boas 1965/1935: 246.
[69] Gregory of Nyssa 1944: 103–13. [70] Nemesius 1844: 13–14. [71] Cole 1967: 10.

BC on, as is the theme of the physical inferiority of humans in relation to animals.[72] So the ideas concerning human weakness and the hostility of nature are ancient ('*natura non mater, sed noverca*', wrote Cicero).[73] They were often used as commonplaces, together or singly, to construct varied theories, sometimes far removed from the view of miserable origins. They would later be found on different occasions in theological conceptions, despite the fact that the Christian doctrine places the earliest humans, strong and perfect, in the welcoming environment of Eden; the same *topoi* can be used as stereotypical raw material in discourses whose principal theses might be strongly original and oppose one another on philosophical or theological planes.

Despite its fluctuating popularity over the centuries, the components of what would become in the eighteenth century the view of the miserable origins has persisted in European culture for more than two millennia. These basic images of conjectural prehistory, recurring in naturalist thought from the middle of the eighteenth century, triumphed in the following century and became the very kernel of evolutionist theory; they are easy to find in the works of Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, Alfred R. Wallace, Lewis H. Morgan, John F. McLennan, John Lubbock and Edward B. Tylor, to mention only the names of the most eminent and well-known scholars. In the twentieth century, as we have seen, traces of the same conceptions are still present in Western culture.

CONJECTURAL HISTORY: A METHOD

Although the vision of prehistory held by the Enlightenment philosophers seems dubious today, it nevertheless remains coherent, the end result of reasoning that follows sufficiently well-defined rules to lead its users, in different social and historical contexts, to similar conclusions. The image of feeble man and hostile nature remains its starting point, from which it is inferred that the life of the first human beings was devoted entirely to the struggle for survival; the emergence of culture, an instrument in that fight, would simply be a consequence of it. Such a deduction implies a few complementary assumptions, almost always passed over in silence as if they were self-evident. Here are the most important:

1. *Environmental determinism.* The behaviour of primitive humans would stem principally from stimuli in their environment. This principle

[72] Anaxagoras, *Fragments* 21b, reproduced in Lovejoy and Boas 1965/1935: 206; Plato 1967a: 52–3.
[73] See also Stoczkowski 1996; Blundell 1986.

allows no room for conduct imposed by the arbitrary character of cultural conventions, at times running counter to natural constraints.

2. *Materialism.* An assumption closely linked to the previous axiom: it is not just a moderate materialism that is postulated, according to which human existence is not entirely determined by culture, but a very extreme materialism, asserting that material existence fully defines culture and cognition. Our ancestors would have spent their entire time in the search for food,[74] and it was only rarely, when fortune had smiled on them and the hunting was good, that they had time to think.[75] These brief moments aside, it is assumed that people did not really think, so cognition could play no part in the genesis of culture.[76]
3. *Utilitarianism.* Everything which humans did would have been an expression of basic needs and would always have been directed towards practical ends. Tools were nothing more than substitutes for claws and fangs, society was the result of economic cooperation, and religion a means, however imperfect, of combating fear and uncertainty in the face of a mysterious and menacing nature.
4. *Individualism.* The origin of culture would be explained by reference to individual needs alone. It was the individual who was cold, hungry, frightened; he it was who was a prey to terror. The social dimension of culture is thus neatly obliterated.

The assumptions of environmental determinism and materialism allow human cognition – believed to be indeterminate and unpredictable – to be eliminated from the anthropological vision, while the assumptions of utilitarianism and individualism banish the equally awkward role of social conventions, the arbitrary and local character of which would get in the way of huge generalisations and historical retrospect. So, what remains active is an ecological and biological determinism which provides apparently solid foundations for a deductive reasoning. What could be more simple than reconstructing prehistory! Since it is obvious that in the beginning was the individual, that the individual was weak, determined by nature, and that nature was hostile, nothing could be easier than to foresee, or rather to 'retrospect', the behaviour of the first humans and the way culture must have come into being.

[74] See, for example, Korovkin 1974: 16; Gralhon 1986: 7. [75] Gralhon 1975: 13.

[76] See, for example, Burnet 1774–92, I: 159; Boulanger 1766, II: 388; Condorcet 1971/1793: 78; Home 1774: 88; Millar 1979/1771: 12; Goguet 1758, I: 179; Voltaire 1963/1756, I: 12; Virey, 1801, I: 95–7.

This deductive procedure enjoyed a great success in the eighteenth century: 'when we cannot trace the process by which an event has been produced', explained Dugald Stewart in 1793, 'it is often of importance to be able to know how it may have been produced by natural causes'.[77] Stewart was one of the first to give a name to this method:

> To this species of philosophical investigation, which has no appropriated name in our language, I shall take the liberty of giving the title Theoretical or Conjectural History; an expression which coincides pretty nearly in its meaning with that of Natural History as employed by Mr. Hume and with what some French writers have called *Histoire Raisonnée*.[78]

The ambitions and rules of the method are very clear. Its aim is to determine the causes of genesis, and the data base on which the explanations must rest are the following:

1. A list of elements whose origin calls for explanation (tools, religion, society, etc.).
2. The principles of plausible explanations: in accordance with our four axioms, the genesis of a character should be the result of its usefulness for the basic needs of the individual, those needs being determined by stimuli from the natural environment.
3. The attributes of the period of human origins: hostile nature, natural cataclysms, attacks by wild animals, human weakness in the absence of culture.

TRANSFORMATIONS OF A MYTH

> Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this.
>
> Ecclesiastes VII.10

Let us return to those conceptions which served as a starting point for the arguments of those philosophers who conjectured about the origin of culture. Neither the principles of *histoire raisonnée* nor determinist views of human nature are able to clarify the source of the ideas of a 'hostile nature' and a 'weak and suffering primordial man'. These two fundamental premises of the 'prehistory' of the philosophers seem to lead an autonomous existence.

The time has come to resort to the term myth, even though its excessive use these days has made it a masker word, lacking any precise meaning.

[77] Stewart 1795/1793: xlii.
[78] *Ibid.* A historical and methodological analysis of *histoire raisonnée* can be found in Leffler 1976.

Indeed, it has become customary to say that everything is myth and that myth is omnipresent, or else the term simply becomes synonymous with any erroneous or fallacious opinion. While having no sympathy for the fashion that requires us to introduce the word at every turn, I must nevertheless acknowledge that the philosophical and school texts we have just been scanning have some features in common with those traditional myths that are summarily consigned to the category of myths of origin. These myths, when narrating how things came into being, used to answer indirectly another question: why did things come into being?[79] The same goes for *histoire raisonnée*. As Helvétius said, it tells us what happened in 'the first days of the world' and attempts to imagine how culture came into being, while trying simultaneously to explain why it did so.

However, we must also take into account divergences – no less interesting – that separate conjectural 'prehistory' from myths of origin. In our culture, a substantial number of traditional narratives situate the beginnings of humankind in a paradisal world of perfect harmony, free from all the conflicts and heartbreaks that later ages would have to endure. In this primordial period, myths tell us, nature was kind to humans, no seasons interrupted everlasting spring,[80] the Earth spontaneously provided all creatures with food in such abundance[81] that neither humans nor animals needed to kill in order to eat; the wolf cropped grass beside the lamb and both were equally mild and obedient to humans, whose hands were unstained not only by the blood of animals but also by that of their fellows.[82] Mankind lived, shielded from disease and unhappiness, with hearts free from sorrow and full of love.[83]

A comparison between those attributes that a significant part of our cultural tradition associates with a paradisal existence and those attributes claimed by naturalist thought for the period of origins is very instructive. The original existence as conceived by the majority of

[79] Lévi-Strauss and Eribon 1988: 195; Boas 1940/1914: 455.

[80] 'It was a season of everlasting spring, when peaceful Zephyrs, with their warm breath, caressed the flowers that sprang up without having been planted' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Innes 1955: 32).

[81] 'The earth itself, without compulsion, untouched by the hoe, unfurrowed by any share, produced all things spontaneously . . . Then there flowed rivers of milk and rivers of nectar, and golden honey dripped from the green holm oak' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Innes 1955: 31–2).

[82] 'All were gentle and obedient to man, both animals and birds, and they glowed with kindly affection towards one another' (Empedocles, *Fragments*, quoted in Lovejoy and Boas 1965/1935: 33).

[83] 'Like gods they lived, with hearts free from sorrow and remote from toil and grief' (Hesiod, quoted in Lovejoy and Boas 1965/1935: 27); cf. also Genesis I–II; Greco-Roman texts can be found in Lovejoy and Boas 1965/1935; medieval texts in Boas 1948; Renaissance texts in Levin 1969.

Enlightenment philosophers and by the authors of modern schoolbooks is manifestly the mirror image which, by a process of inversion, depicts a Golden Age in reverse, where the paradisal features are replaced by their opposites: here food in plenty, there famine; here happiness, there misery; here a kind nature and a friendship with the animals, there a pitiless nature and perpetual warfare with fierce beasts; here a powerful humanity, controlling nature, there a weak man in fear of nature.

Until the eighteenth century, the Bible preserved its status as a fundamental historical work and Moses, the presumed author of the first five books, including Genesis, was called 'the most ancient of historians, the most sublime of philosophers'.[84] It was through the Bible, together with Greek and Latin texts, that the myth of original bliss became, in post-classical Europe, the main source of the representations of earliest times. J.-B. Bossuet, who, in his position as tutor to the Dauphin in the years 1670 to 1680, developed his *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*, painted this picture of the origins: '[Moses] shows us . . . the Perfection and Power of Man, how much he bore of the Image of God in his entirety; his Empire over all Creatures; his innocence, together with his Felicity in the Garden of Eden, whose memory is conserv'd in the Golden Age of the Poets'.[85]

The myth of primordial felicity, rooted as much in the biblical tradition as in parts of the Greco-Roman legacy, steered people's dreams towards the earliest times, towards an original perfection that subsequent periods have debased, leaving them little to be proud of in what has been accomplished on Earth; they would have to wait for this world to be destroyed in an apocalypse that would restore a new paradise.

It is true that theologians have never been prone to condemn terrestrial toil or practical knowledge. However, the latter, '*scientia*', was in their teaching merely an 'inferior part of the reason by which humans manage their earthly affairs and profane occupations and try to live correctly in this depraved world'.[86] No Christian should forget the question in Ecclesiastes 1.3: 'What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?'

The classical mind, inspired by the Bible and the Greco-Roman tradition, seems enamoured of immutability, while the rebellious spirit of the Enlightenment, in complete contrast, desires change: change that claims to be development and progress. Condorcet was not the only one to paint 'an image of humanity marching with a firm, sure step

[84] Bossuet 1966/1681: 47. [85] *Ibid.*
[86] The Venerable Hildebert, *1st Sermon on Palm Sunday*, quoted in Boas 1948: 127.

along the road to truth and happiness', towards a future free of 'the crimes and injustices that still stain the earth'.[87] The Enlightenment philosophers, even if they dreamed of a 'noble savage' and criticised the barbarity of civilised peoples, never abandoned hope that humans and their society have a 'natural tendency to improve their lot'.[88] How could they at the same time believe that the original state represented absolute perfection?

Authors who insisted on respecting the authority of the Bible and the Ancients were circumspect in their references to the age of Eden,[89] but free thinkers could not refrain from bitterness when describing the supposed original happiness of humanity. For Holbach, 'the savage life or the natural state, to which disgruntled speculators have wanted to return humanity, the Golden Age so praised by the poets are, in truth, nothing but states of wretchedness, imbecility, irrationality. To invite us to return to them is to tell us to return to infancy, to forget all we know, to relinquish the enlightenment our minds have succeeded in acquiring.'[90]

For the generation that was fascinated by the creative power of the human spirit, for the century that would see the goddess of Reason set up on the altar of Notre Dame in Paris, the myth of the Golden Age could easily become an insult. And so Buffon, at the end of his ironic sketch of the comforts of the Golden Age, asked sarcastically: 'To be happy, what is needed, other than to desire nothing?' And he continued passionately: 'If that is so, let us say at the same time that it is sweeter to vegetate than to live, to crave nothing than to satisfy our craving, to lie in apathetic sleep than to open our eyes to see and to feel; let us consent to leave our soul in torpor, our mind in darkness and never to use either, to place ourselves below the animals, in the end to be nothing but masses of crude matter attached to the earth.'[91]

The picture of paradise is presented as a mere eulogy to passivity and inertia. Against this, the Enlightenment set the apotheosis of the active life that must be led down here by humans, as pilgrims seeking truth and happiness by building a civilisation based on reason. The path of progress leads from the state of primitive savagery towards the pinnacle of civilisation; only Rousseau vigorously contested this view, while Helvétius

[87] Condorcet 1971/1793: 284.
[88] Holbach 1822/1773: 273; also Burnet 1774–92, I: 147–9; Rousseau 1973/1755: 343; Voltaire, quoted in Duchet 1971: 285.
[89] E.g. Burnet 1774–92, I: 367; Turgot 1973/1750: 65. [90] Holbach 1822/1773: 276.
[91] Buffon 1825e/1758: 164; see also Boulanger 1766, I: 388.

and Diderot, who are occasionally suspected of sharing his opinion, seem rather to have believed that the moral depravity of their contemporaries was the fruit of bad legislation, and that happiness would be possible in a reformed civilisation.[92] According to a conception very popular in the second half of the eighteenth century, successive stages of technical progress would be marked by transformations in the arts of subsistence, starting from the age of hunting and moving on to the age of trade by way of periods of herding and agriculture.[93] The stage of development at which certain philosophers believed themselves to have arrived allowed them to contemplate the image of achievement that is best depicted by Buffon:

> Flowers, fruits, and grains matured to perfection, and multiplied to infinity; the useful species of animals transported, propagated and increased without number; the noxious kinds diminished and banished from the abodes of men; gold, and iron, a more useful metal, extracted from the bowels of the earth; torrents restrained, and rivers directed and confined within their banks; even the ocean itself subdued, investigated, and traversed from the one hemisphere to the other; the earth everywhere accessible, and rendered active and fertile; the valleys and plains converted into smiling meadows, rich pastures, and cultivated fields; the hills loaded with vines and fruits, and their summits crowned with useful trees; the deserts turned into populous cities, whose inhabitants spread from its centre to its utmost extremities; open and frequented roads and communications everywhere established, as so many evidences of the union and strength of society. A thousand other monuments of power and of glory sufficiently demonstrate that man is the lord of the earth; that he has entirely changed and renewed its surface; and that from the remotest periods of time, he alone has divided the empire of the world between him and Nature.[94]

So, human beings succeeded, by dint of hard work, in planting with their own hands the Garden of Paradise. For the landscape Buffon paints for us has all of its attributes: 'Uncultivated nature is hideous and languishing' and only man can 'render her agreeable and vivacious.' Thus will 'Nature acquire redoubled strength and splendour from the skill and industry of man.'[95] It is certainly paradise, but transferred from the beginning of History to its end. Did not Saint-Simon assert later: 'The Golden Age, that blind tradition placed in the past, lies ahead of us'?[96]

The history of humanity thus became a Genesis, in which the civilised world represented a new creation, with Humankind, instead of God, as

[92] Diderot 1972/1773–4: 177–8, see Duchet 1971: 393, 436–8. [93] Meek 1976.
[94] Buffon, trans. Smellie 1791, VI: 261. [95] *Ibid.*: 259–60. [96] Quoted in Cioran 1960: 133.