

For an anthropology and archaeology of freedom

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Radcliffe-Brown Lecture in Social Anthropology, 7 March 2022

Abstract

‘Freedom’ has been characterised as a ‘weird, Western concept’ of little relevance to a broader understanding of human societies. Accordingly, it is sometimes suggested that anthropology, and its sister discipline of archaeology, have had little to say about freedom. Drawing on a collaboration with the late David Graeber, and reflections on the anthropology of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, I will argue to the contrary that an ethnography of freedom – with its main locus in the colonial milieu of 17th-century North America – lies close to the disciplinary foundations of anthropology, and also has something to say about the modern development of our supposedly weird, supposedly Western concept.

Keywords

Native American history, Indigenous critique, Age of Enlightenment, anthropology, freedom.

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In memory of David Graeber¹

As an archaeologist tasked with giving the Radcliffe-Brown Lecture, I feel obligated to start with a few words on history. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown is widely characterised as an ahistorical anthropologist who – in his concern to establish a nomothetic approach to the study of social institutions – threw the baby out with the bathwater. Notably in Africa, his interpretations of ethnographic data through the lens of ‘structural-functionalist’ theory are often seen as a direct extension of British colonial policies in the early 20th century, lending scientific authority to a false picture of local societies as lacking in political dynamism, weighed down by chains of customary law.

No doubt, there is scope to quibble with this characterisation. One could point out that, strictly speaking, what Radcliffe-Brown was opposing on methodological grounds was not history as such, but the kind of conjectural history that prevailed in anthropological thinking during the discipline’s formation. Radcliffe-Brown’s own perspective is conveyed in the concluding passage of the (1940) essay ‘on joking relationships’. ‘If it be asked,’ he wrote, ‘why that society has the structure that it does have, the only possible answer would lie in its history.’ ‘When the history is unrecorded,’ he went on, ‘we can only indulge in conjecture, and conjecture gives us neither scientific nor historical knowledge.’²

Today, we can choose to read this passage in at least two entirely different ways: as an open invitation to a more historically (and archaeologically) informed anthropology, or as a foregone conclusion that any such enterprise is doomed to fail. It’s not my place to adjudicate on what Radcliffe-Brown intended. But given the topic of my lecture – which is anthropology and freedom – it seems important to leave open the question. Because what I intend to argue is that the two issues are inseparable: to deny the historicity of any society is also to deny its capacity for freedom. Of course, the point has been made before, but largely in philosophical terms.³ My intention here is to explore this nexus between history, anthropology, and freedom in a more focussed way.

In particular, I want to offer some reflections on a theme that has already been quite widely noted: the relative absence of ‘freedom’ itself as a topic in anglophone anthropology and archaeology, and some implications of that absence. I will be drawing from a new body of work that developed over more than ten years’ collaboration with David Graeber, the anthropologist whose shoes I am asked to fill here (David’s favourite shoes, I should add, were made of alligator skin, and I watched with amazement as they slowly disintegrated over the course of those years, yet somehow remained, miraculously, on his feet). Radcliffe-Brown’s anthropology offers a good point of departure.

Jack Goody has argued that, contrary to modern perceptions, Radcliffe-Brown’s search for a ‘natural science of society’ was itself motivated by a desire to show how certain negative kinds of freedom (freedom ‘from’, rather than ‘to’) can generate viable social forms and institutions. In an essay called ‘Anarchy Brown’, Goody reminds us of Radcliffe-Brown’s intellectual formation through the works of Peter Kropotkin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Mikhail Bakunin; how this

¹The honour of giving the Radcliffe-Brown Lecture was initially extended to David Graeber in recognition of his exceptional contributions to social anthropology. Following David’s unexpected death on 2 September 2020, I was asked to fill his shoes. The topic I have chosen builds upon research we conducted together, culminating in our co-authored book, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Graeber & Wengrow 2021).

²Radcliffe-Brown (1940: 210).

³e.g. Adorno (2006 [1964/5]).

shaped his interest in societies that have at least partly escaped the shadow of the colonial State; and how those societies, nevertheless, maintain a degree of internal order.⁴

What Goody also shows, though, is how what began as a study of freedom led, in practice, to the opposite. Instead of seeking a more precise definition of customary freedoms among Andaman Islanders in the Bay of Bengal or Aboriginal societies in western Australia (as he did – quite brilliantly – for their customary prohibitions, obligations, constraints, and sanctions), Radcliffe-Brown built up his comparative anthropology almost entirely by studying internal mechanisms of control. Even in the case of ‘joking relations’, free licence to mock one’s affines in public was found, in the last resort, to serve a regulatory function. The motivation and message are clear enough, that absence of the State does not mean absence of order. But it begs the question, what about positive freedoms?

The standard answer has been that freedom is a ‘weird Western concept’ (in the words of Orlando Patterson),⁵ of little relevance to a broader understanding of human societies. Indeed, anthropology has established key theoretical insights – on matters such as caste and slavery – by explicitly rejecting the concept of freedom as irrelevant to any serious framing or analysis of the topic. It is something that unites such disparate figures as Franz Boas, Louis Dumont, and Claude Meillassoux.⁶ Caroline Humphrey brings things up to recent times with an essay, ‘Alternative Freedoms’, pointing out how political claims regarding the universal value of individual freedoms may be incompatible with ‘the range of ideas held in other societies’, including her prime example of contemporary Russian society.⁷

Joel Robbins suggests that the rejection of freedom as an irredeemably Eurocentric concept has been constitutive, not just of anthropology, but of ‘the social sciences more generally’.⁸ In his 2001 Malinowski Lecture, ‘For an anthropology of ethics and freedom’, James Laidlaw affirmed that freedom is ‘a concept about which anthropology has had strikingly little to say’. ‘Freedom’, he notes, has a different scope and potential to the ubiquitous concept of ‘agency’, since only the former insists on an element of choice and evaluation – the human subject, consciously removing herself from her immediate social context, to reflect on how one ought to live – which is also, he suggests, the basis for a comparative study of ethics.⁹

To begin such a study, Laidlaw proposes a bold ethnographic project. Its focus would be on describing and characterising the very possibilities of human freedom: ‘how freedom is exercised in different social contexts and cultural traditions.’ In response to this proposal, my own lecture will argue five points. First, that such an ethnography already exists. Second, that it lies at the very foundations of anthropology as a discipline (and of ethnography as a method). Third, that its primary locus was the Americas, specifically the Eastern Woodlands of North America, in the 17th and 18th centuries. Fourth, that it was carried out as much by Indigenous observers and intellectuals as by Europeans. Fifth, and finally, that its results made a significant contribution to what we now call ‘the Enlightenment’, including what we have come to regard as exclusively Western notions of liberty.

⁴Goody (2000).

⁵Patterson (1991).

⁶Boas (1940); Dumont (1972); Meillassoux (1991).

⁷Humphrey (2007).

⁸Robbins (2007: 295).

⁹Laidlaw (2002).

Before we start, it seems important to consider the reception of Laidlaw's own ideas (now some two decades old); in particular, objections raised by other social anthropologists. These are most succinctly expressed by Webb Keane. An anthropology of ethics, he suggests, can be justified on the grounds that all humans are capable – at least in principle – of basing their decisions about how to live on value judgements, conscious reflection, and notions of accountability; and this presumably has been true of our species for hundreds of thousands of years. It follows, logically, that if ethical behaviour is inseparable from the exercise of freedom, freedom too must be a 'universal' and 'immanent' feature of human social life, whether or not it's explicitly thematised as such in any given cultural context.

Here, for Keane, is where the doubts set in. In his own words:

Laidlaw's deployment of the language of freedom makes me nervous, for three reasons. It carries a lot of *genealogical* baggage [original emphasis], it challenges the ethnographic commitment to *taking seriously other worlds* [original emphasis], populated with unfamiliar kinds of responsible agents, and it threatens to undo some of the major insights that were won through the social sciences' *decentering* moves [original emphasis].¹⁰

The remainder of my article is, effectively, an answer to these points from history. I will return to them at the end, but wish to begin my main discussion with a historiographical problem.

Many influential thinkers of the European Enlightenment, especially in France, claimed their ideas on matters of freedom and equality were taken from Native American sources.¹¹ They referred in particular to travellers' accounts and missionary relations from the Great Lakes region of what is now Canada, which they then called New France. At the time, the wider region was inhabited mainly by speakers of Montagnais-Naskapi, Algonkian, and Iroquoian languages, including many who became deeply familiar with European languages and customs; just as European traders, missionaries, and settlers learned native languages, engaged in prolonged conversations with Indigenous people, and often lived among them for extended periods of time – even as they colluded in their destruction.

Yet for the most part, intellectual historians have insisted that no meaningful exchange of ideas really took place. Indigenous people are assumed to have lived in a quite different mental universe to Europeans, inhabiting almost a different reality (or 'ontology'); such that anything Europeans said or wrote about them was a shadow-play projection, fantasies of the 'noble savage' culled from the European tradition itself. Indigenous intellectuals, when they appear in such accounts, are assumed to be sock puppets, used as plausible alibis to an author who might otherwise get into trouble for presenting subversive ideas (such as deism, rational materialism, or unconventional views on marriage).¹²

In recent decades, a growing number of American and Canadian scholars have gone back to these sources, and reached different conclusions. I refer here especially to the work of Georges Sioui, in his book *For an Amerindian Autohistory*.¹³ Peoples of the Great Lakes regions, they propose, developed their own critique of European institutions, which focused initially on these institutions' lack of freedom, including women's freedoms. Not only does this critique emerge clearly from literary and epistolary sources; it is also consistent with the known histories of particular

¹⁰ Keane (2014: 448-9).

¹¹ See examples reviewed and discussed in Harvey (2012).

¹² e.g. Pagden (1983; 1993); Sayre (1997).

¹³ Sioui (1992); also Steckley (1981); Sioui (1999); Mann (2001).

individuals who lived in the region at that time. What's more, the critique came to be taken very seriously in Europe itself.

A key case in point here is the 17th-century encounter between a French aristocrat named Louis-Armand de Lom d'Arce, Baron de la Hontan, and an unusually brilliant Wendat statesman named Kandiaronk. In 1683, Lahontan (as he came to be known), then 17 years old, joined the French army and was posted to Canada. Over the course of the next decade he took part in a number of campaigns and expeditions, attaining the rank of deputy to the Governor-General, the Comte de Frontenac. In the process he became fluent in both Algonkian and Wendat, and – by his own account at least – good friends with a number of Indigenous political figures. Lahontan later claimed that, because he was something of a sceptic in religious matters and a political enemy of the Jesuits, these figures were willing to share with him their actual opinions about Christian teachings. One of them was Kandiaronk.

A key strategist of the Wendat Confederacy, a coalition of four Iroquoian-speaking peoples, Kandiaronk (his name literally meant 'the muskrat' and the French often referred to him simply as 'Le Rat') was at that time engaged in a complex geopolitical game, trying to play the English, French and Five Nations of the Haudenosaunee off against each other, with the initial aim of averting a disastrous Haudenosaunee assault on the Wendat, but with the long-term goal of creating a comprehensive Indigenous alliance to hold off the settler advance.¹⁴ Everyone who met him, friend or foe, admitted that Kandiaronk was a truly remarkable individual: a courageous warrior, brilliant orator, and an unusually skilful politician. He was also, to the very end of his life, a staunch opponent of Christianity.

In the opening years of the 18th century, Lahontan published a series of memoirs of his American adventures, including the (1703) *Curious Dialogues with a Savage of Good Sense Who Has Travelled*. It comprised a set of four conversations between Lahontan and a Wendat sage, who is given the name 'Adario'. Voicing opinions based on his own ethnographic observations of Montreal, New York and Paris, Adario casts an extremely critical eye on European mores and ideas about religion, politics, health, and sexual life. Lahontan's books won a wide audience, and before long he had become something of a minor celebrity, settling at the court of Hanover, where he befriended Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who – in a private letter – notes that Adario was 'a real person from the tribe of the Hurons, who came to France several years ago, but considered his own institutions better than ours.'¹⁵

Most modern criticism of Lahontan's work assumes, by contrast, that the dialogues are made up, and that the arguments attributed to 'Adario' are the opinions of Lahontan himself.¹⁶ There are, indeed, some reasonable grounds for thinking this. Leibniz himself concedes, in the same letter, that Lahontan took a degree of artistic licence with his memoirs and dialogues. But as others have pointed out more recently, there are equally good, if not better, reasons for assuming the opposite, based on what we know about Kandiaronk himself. The real-life Adario was famous not only for his eloquence, but was known for engaging in debates with Europeans of just the sort recorded in Lahontan's book. There are first-hand accounts of Kandiaronk's oratorical skills and dazzling wit.

In the 1690s, it seems, the Montreal-based governor of New France and his officers (including Lahontan) hosted what we might call a proto-Enlightenment salon, where they invited Kandiaronk

¹⁴ Steckley (2014).

¹⁵ Leibniz to Bierling, 10 November 1710, Hanover. In *Gothofredi Guillelmi Leibnitii* (Fratres de Tournes, 1768: 361–3).

¹⁶ Chinard (1931); Ouellet (1990); Sayre (1997); Muthu (2003).

to debate exactly the sort of matters that appear in the *Dialogues*, and where Kandiaronk took the position of rational sceptic. Pierre de Charlevoix, the Jesuit priest and historian, described Kandiaronk as so ‘naturally eloquent’ that ‘no one perhaps ever exceeded him in mental capacity.’ ‘An exceptional council speaker, he was not less brilliant in conversation in private, and [councilmen and negotiators] often took pleasure in provoking him to hear his repartees, always animated, full of wit, and generally unanswerable.’ ‘He was the only man in Canada’, Charlevoix notes, ‘who was a match for the [governor] Count de Frontenac, who often invited him to his table to give his officers this pleasure.’¹⁷

What’s more, there is every reason to believe that Kandiaronk actually *had* been to France; that’s to say, we know the Wendat Confederation sent an ambassador to visit the court of Louis XIV in 1691, and Kandiaronk’s office at the time was Speaker of the Council, which would have made him the logical choice.¹⁸ While the intimate knowledge of European affairs and understanding of European psychology attributed to Adario might seem implausible, Kandiaronk was a man who had been engaged in political negotiations with Europeans for years, and regularly ran circles around them by anticipating their logic, interests, blind spots and reactions. Finally, many of the critiques of Christianity, and European ways more generally, attributed to Adario correspond almost exactly to criticisms documented from other speakers of Iroquoian languages around the same time.

Let us now consider what some of these critiques amount to, with particular reference to the issue of freedom, and drawing not just on Lahontan, but also observations recorded throughout 73 volumes of the multi-authored *Jesuit Relations* (which appeared between 1633 and 1673, to be instantly read and widely debated in Europe). One thing is worth noting at the outset: that Indigenous Americans lived in generally free societies, and that Europeans did not, was never really a matter of debate in these exchanges.¹⁹ Both sides agreed this was the case. What they differed on was whether or not liberty was desirable. Take the Jesuit missionary Paul Le Jeune, writing in 1642 of the Montagnais-Naskapi:

They imagine that they ought by right of birth, to enjoy the liberty of wild ass colts, rendering no homage to any one whomsoever, except when they like. They have reproached me a hundred times because we fear our Captains, while they laugh at and make sport of theirs. All the authority of their chief is in his tongue’s end; for he is powerful in so far as he is eloquent; and, even if he kills himself talking and haranguing, he will not be obeyed unless he pleases the Savages.²⁰

What we find here is an explicit, if begrudging acknowledgement of the connection between reasoned debate, personal freedoms, and the refusal of arbitrary power. These connected traits were widely reported by Europeans living among speakers of Iroquoian languages, such as the Wendat and the five Haudenosaunee nations to their south, as well as among the Montagnais-Naskapi. In the considered opinion of the latter, the French were little better than slaves, living in constant terror of their superiors. Such criticism appears regularly in Jesuit accounts; what’s more, it comes not just from those who lived in nomadic bands, but equally from townsfolk like the

¹⁷ Cited in Mann (2001: 55).

¹⁸ Mann (2001: 55–57).

¹⁹ Jaenen (1974: 288); Coates (2013).

²⁰ *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610–1791*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (1896–1901), and henceforth: *JR* 6: 109–10/241. The term ‘captain’ is used indiscriminately in French sources for any male in a position of authority, whether that be a headman of a band or village, or the holder of an official rank in the Wendat or Haudenosaunee Confederation.

Wendat. The missionaries, moreover, were willing to concede that this wasn't all just rhetoric on the part of Indigenous Americans.

Even Wendat statesmen couldn't compel anyone to do anything they didn't wish to do. As Father Lallemand, whose correspondence provided an initial model for *The Jesuit Relations*, noted of the Wendat in 1644:

I do not believe that there is any people on earth freer than they, and less able to allow the subjection of their wills to any power whatever – so much so that Fathers here have no control over their children, or Captains over their subjects, or the Laws of the country over any of them, except in so far as each is pleased to submit to them. There is no punishment which is inflicted on the guilty, and no criminal who is not sure that his life and property are in no danger . . .²¹

Instead, Lallemand noted, in cases of criminal damage, the Wendat insisted the culprit's entire lineage or clan pay compensation, and in doing so – he reported – relatives would often vie to outdo each other in generosity. His account gives a sense of just how challenging some of the material to be found in the *Jesuit Relations* must have been to European audiences of the time, and why many found it fascinating. After expanding on how scandalous it was that even murderers should get off scot-free, Lallemand admits that the Wendat system of justice was not ineffective, and actually worked 'more effectually to repress disorders than the personal punishment of criminals does in France', despite being 'a very mild proceeding, which leaves individuals in such a spirit of liberty that they never submit to any Laws and obey no other impulse than that of their own will'.²²

It is clear from such accounts that Wendat society was not egalitarian in an economic sense. On the other hand, there was no obvious way to convert material resources into power over others (with the consequence that differences of wealth had little effect on personal freedoms). This applied just as much to land and agricultural products, which were managed by women's collectives,²³ as to political goods such as *wampum*. At best, the accumulation and adroit distribution of such valuables might make an individual more likely to aspire to political office; but as the Jesuit accounts repeatedly stress, merely holding office did not give anyone the right to give orders. Or, more accurately, an office holder could give all the orders he or she liked, but nobody was under any obligation to follow them. In France, of course, the situation could not have been more different.

Equality, insofar as it existed among the Wendat, was a direct extension of freedom; indeed, its expression. All were equal, insofar as they were equally free to obey or disobey orders as they saw fit (which, again, has almost nothing in common with the European notion of 'equality before the law', which is equality in common subjugation to a sovereign). The democratic governance of the Wendat and Five Nations of the Haudenosaunee, which so impressed later European readers, was an expression of the same principle: if no compulsion was allowed, then obviously such social coherence as did exist had to be created through reasoned debate, persuasive arguments, and the establishment of social consensus.

Jesuits, let's recall, were the intellectuals of the Catholic world. Trained in classical rhetoric and techniques of disputation, they had learned Native American languages primarily so as to be

²¹ *JR* 28: 47.

²² *JR* 28: 48-9; cf. *JR* 10: 211-21.

²³ Birch (2016).

able to argue with them, to persuade them of the superiority of the Christian faith.²⁴ Yet they regularly found themselves startled and impressed by the logical quality of the counterarguments they had to contend with (a theme that runs through most accounts). So, Father Le Jeune, Superior of the Jesuits in Canada in the 1630s: ‘There are almost none of them incapable of conversing or reasoning very well, and in good terms, on matters within their knowledge. The councils, held almost every day in the Villages, and on almost all matters, improve their capacity for talking.’²⁵

Indigenous assessments of French character – including habits of conversation – were less positive. Father Pierre Biard, for example, was a former theology professor assigned in 1608 to evangelise the Algonkian-speaking Mi’kmaq in Nova Scotia, who had lived for some time next to a French fort. Biard did not think much of the Mi’kmaq, but reported that the feeling was mutual: ‘They consider themselves better than the French: “For,” they say, “you are always fighting and quarrelling among yourselves . . . you are covetous, and are neither generous nor kind.” They are saying these and like things continually.’²⁶ What seemed to irritate Biard most was the Mi’kmaq’s insistence that they were, as a result, ‘richer’ than the French. The French had more material possessions, the Mi’kmaq conceded; but they had other, greater assets: ease, comfort and time.

Twenty years later, Brother Gabriel Sagard, a Recollect Friar, wrote similar things of the Wendat nation. Sagard was at first highly critical of Wendat life, which he described as inherently sinful, but by the end of his sojourn had come to the conclusion that their social arrangements were in many ways superior to those of his native France. In the following passages he is clearly echoing Wendat opinion: ‘They have no lawsuits and take little pains to acquire the goods of this life, for which we Christians torment ourselves so much, and for our excessive and insatiable greed in acquiring them we are justly and with reason reprov’d by their quiet life and tranquil dispositions.’²⁷ Much like Biard’s Mi’kmaq, the Wendat were particularly offended by the French lack of generosity to one another. Their towns and villages, Sagard observed, were free of those ‘indigent beggars’ who lined the streets of French cities.

Here we find another consistent theme in the Indigenous critique of European society, which might be best characterised as its poverty of mutual aid. It seemed extraordinary to Wendat observers that Frenchmen could refuse a request for food and shelter by one of their own. Europeans were constantly jostling for advantage; societies of the Northeast Woodlands, by contrast, guaranteed their members the means to an autonomous life, or at least ensured no man or woman was subordinated to another. Insofar as we can speak of communal values, these existed in support of individual freedoms, not in opposition to them. By contrast, the European conception of individual freedom was tied ineluctably to notions of private property. As Patterson explains, this association traces back ultimately to the power of the male household head in antiquity, who could do whatever he liked with his chattels and possessions, including his children and slaves. In this view, freedom was always defined – at least potentially – as something exercised to the cost of others.²⁸

To the Jesuits, Indigenous ideals of liberty were outrageous. In fact, their attitude is the exact opposite of the attitude most French or Canadian people tend to hold today: that personal freedom is an altogether admirable ideal. The Jesuits, by contrast, were opposed to freedom in principle. The ‘wicked liberty of the savages’, as one observed, was the single greatest impediment to their

²⁴ Graham (2021).

²⁵ *JR* 10: 213; see also, Sioui (1999).

²⁶ Cited in Ellingson (2001: 51).

²⁷ Sagard (1939 [1632]: 192).

²⁸ Patterson (1991).

‘submitting to the yoke of the law of God’.²⁹ Even finding terms to translate concepts like ‘lord’, ‘commandment’, or ‘obedience’ into Indigenous languages was extremely difficult; explaining the underlying theological concepts, well-nigh impossible. On this point, let us give the floor to Kandiaronk (via the medium of Lahontan), here arguing that the whole coercive religious-juridical apparatus would be unnecessary, if France did not also maintain a contrary apparatus that encourages people to pursue material self-interest:

I have spent six years reflecting on the state of European society and I still can’t think of a single way they act that’s not inhuman, and I genuinely think this can only be the case, as long as you stick to your distinctions of ‘mine’ and ‘thine’. I affirm that what you call money is the devil of devils; the tyrant of the French, the source of all evils; the bane of souls and slaughterhouse of the living. To imagine one can live in the country of money and preserve one’s soul is like imagining one could preserve one’s life at the bottom of a lake.³⁰

For Europeans in 1703, this was heady stuff.

Lahontan’s were not the first such accounts to become influential bestsellers in France and across Europe; both Locke and Voltaire, for instance, cited Sagard’s (1632) *Le grand voyage du pays des Hurons* as a primary source for their descriptions of American societies. But the impact of Lahontan’s dialogues on European sensibilities was truly unprecedented. As a result, Kandiaronk’s opinions were translated into German, English, Dutch and Italian, and continued in print, in multiple editions, for over a century. Any self-respecting intellectual of the 18th century would have been almost certain to have read them. They also inspired a flood of imitations. By 1721, Parisian theatregoers were flocking to Delisle de la Drevetière’s comedy *L’Arlequin sauvage*: the story of a Wendat brought to France by a young sea captain, featuring a long series of indignant monologues in which the hero ‘attributes the ills of [French] society to private property, to money, and in particular to the monstrous inequality which makes the poor the slaves of the rich’. The play was revived almost yearly for the next two decades.³¹

Even more strikingly, just about every major French Enlightenment figure tried their hand at a Lahontan-style critique of their own society, from the perspective of some imagined outsider. Montesquieu chose a Persian; the Marquis d’Argens a Chinese; Diderot a Tahitian; Chateaubriand a Natchez; Voltaire’s *L’Ingénu* was half Wendat and half French.³² All took up and developed themes and arguments borrowed from Kandiaronk, supplemented by lines from other ‘savage critics’³³ in travellers’ accounts. Indeed, a strong case can be made for the real origins of the ‘Western gaze’ – that rational, supposedly objective way of looking at strange and exotic cultures, which eventually came to characterise European anthropology – lying not in travellers’ accounts, but rather in accounts of precisely these imaginary sceptical natives: gazing inwards, brows furrowed, at the exotic curiosities of Europe itself.

At this point, and in drawing my case to a close, I want to turn from historical critiques back to modern ones. Let’s recall some recent objections to an anthropology of freedom: ‘it carries a lot of *genealogical baggage*, it challenges the ethnographic commitment to *taking seriously other worlds* . . . and it threatens to undo some of the major insights that were won through the social sciences’

²⁹JR 5: 175.

³⁰Lahontan (1735 [1704]: 141–2); translation after Mann (2001).

³¹Ouellet 1995: 328.

³²Harvey (2012).

³³The expression is Pagden’s (1983).

decentering moves.’³⁴ In light of the material and arguments presented here, I would like to make almost exactly the opposite case, as follows.

Our understanding of the concept of freedom is problematic, I suggest, precisely because its genealogy is *artificially truncated*, to exclude the contributions of Indigenous peoples and thinkers.³⁵ Honouring the commitment to take other ways of living seriously means, first and foremost, doing the *archival work* of uncovering those conceptual and philosophical debts we owe to non-Europeans. Far from threatening to reinstate a Eurocentric view of the social sciences, I propose these are in fact baby steps towards decentring our grasp of global history – by questioning processes of intellectual appropriation, and challenging the purification of European systems of knowledge – including the roots of what we have come to call the ‘Age of Enlightenment’.³⁶

With this in mind, a major question remains: how exactly did the Indigenous societies of North America’s Eastern Woodlands come to develop political sensibilities that were to have a deep influence on Enlightenment thinkers? How did the Wendat, and neighbouring societies, come to embrace values of human freedom which would have a profound impact on Europe and, ultimately, on the world? Here we might echo A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, and concede that the ‘only possible answer’ would lie in their history, and their archaeology.³⁷

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks to Georges Sioui for numerous, informative discussions on the topics covered in this article.

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³⁴ Keane (2014: 448–9).

³⁵ For a recent example, see de Dijn (2020).

³⁶ cf. Lorado Wilner (2013); Graeber (2019: 10).

³⁷ See further, Graeber & Wengrow (2021: chapter 11).

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To cite the article: Wengrow, D. (2022), 'For an anthropology and archaeology of freedom', *Journal of the British Academy*, 10: 55–65. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/010s1.055>

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Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk

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