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Aboriginal imaginary, state of nature, and modern subjectivity:  
the example of Hobbes' *Leviathan*.

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## Introduction :

In a central chapter of *The History of Madness* entitled “The Great Confinement,” Michel Foucault proposes a bold interpretation of Descartes’ *First Meditation*. He uses a short excerpt of the meditation<sup>1</sup> about “mad men” and their “extravagance” to show that the age of reason, early modernity, (*âge classique* is the French expression used by Foucault) excludes madness by silencing it: “[a]fter defusing its violence, the Renaissance had liberated the voice of Madness. The age of reason, in a strange takeover, was then to reduce it to silence.” (Foucault, 2006, p. 44) For Descartes and his modern followers, Foucault affirms, madness is not just an error, but an “impossibility.” Madness attacks the “thinking subject” directly rather than the “object of his thought” and as such, “madness is precisely a condition of impossibility for thought”—as expressed by the last sentence of the passage under study: “[b]ut they are mad, and I should not be any the less insane were I to follow examples so extravagant.” (Descartes, 1996, p. 59) *The History of Madness* remains a controversial book for historians, who often challenge the accuracy of Foucault’s historical illustrations and timing. But, perhaps the harshest critique delivered against Foucault’s work was that of his former student, Jacques Derrida,<sup>2</sup> who, in a conference entitled “Cogito and the History of Madness” (delivered in 1963 and published in *L’écriture et la différence* in 1967) challenges Foucault’s reading of the passage, and with it, questions the whole cogency of Foucault’s project, attempting to give voice to *unreason*.

This heated intellectual exchange may seem anecdotic,<sup>3</sup> but it forced Foucault to justify and defend his unconventional approach of philosophical texts, one where classic arguments are neglected in favour of seemingly marginal comments, symptomatic of deeper exclusions at work in history, encompassing discourses and social practices. While unconventional and perhaps fragile, such a reading of canonical texts remains an interesting wager, opening up new interpretive possibilities, shedding lights on issues and topics too often ignored by commentators. For these reasons, I am proposing here an interpretation of Hobbes analog to Foucault’s rereading of Descartes. The foundational text of political philosophy under investigation is Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, written shortly after Descartes Meditations (and first published in 1651): the passage to study, an excerpt from

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<sup>1</sup> Passage in question: “But it may be that although the senses sometimes deceive us concerning things which are hardly perceptible, or very far away, there are yet many others to be met with as to which we cannot reasonably have any doubt, although we recognise them by their means. For example, there is the fact that I am here, seated by the fire, attired in a dressing gown, having this paper in my hands and other similar matters. (Descartes, 1996, p. 59) How could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass. (*First meditation* quoted in Foucault, 2006, p. 44) But they are mad, and I should not be any the less insane were I to follow examples so extravagant.” (Descartes, 1996, p. 59)

<sup>2</sup> This central chapter was actually cut in the English translation *Madness and Civilization*. Foucault’s rereading of Descartes was thus partly missing for a long time in English; only recently was the full translation of *The History of Madness* made available. Derrida, in his counter-analysis of Foucault’s reading of the passage, considers this point as exemplary of the whole project, actually carrying the whole argument and methodology of the book. The critique Derrida addresses to his former professor, Foucault, is scathing: Foucault’s misreading of Descartes undermined his whole intellectual project. (Derrida, 1967; Foucault, 1972, pp. 67-109)

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is often treated as just this, an anecdote to be recounted in Foucault biographies (Cf. Eribon, 2011, pp. 144-145). A few scholars have devoted their attention to the debate, among them: Pierre Macherey, Gabriel Rockhill, Jacques De Ville, Bernard Flynn, Robert Boyne, and Slavoj Žižek.

Chapter 13 entitled “*On the Natural Condition to Mankind, as Concerning their Felicity, and Misery*”, and the incriminated sentence, the second one in the excerpt:

It may peradventure be thought there was never such a time nor condition of war as this; and I believe it was never generally so, over all the world: but there are many places where they live so now. For *the savage people in many places of America*, except the government of small families, the concord whereof dependeth on natural lust, have no government at all, and live at this day in that brutish manner, as I said before. (Hobbes, 1968, p. 187)

The interpretation proposed in this paper will suggest that, just as Descartes’ *First Meditation* is symptomatic of a “silencing” of madness, Hobbes’ *Leviathan* is symptomatic of a similar movement of exclusion, shutting off “savages” out of civility and modern subjectivity. After the “discovery” of the New World, the “savages” literally (and geographically) at the ends of the world make a sudden irruption in the world of Westerners and paradoxically this new acknowledgement is also a denial. Just as the “silencing” of madness was certainly not Descartes’ main intention in the *First Meditation*, Hobbes’ main purposes in the *Leviathan* and other works is certainly not “silencing” Indigenous Americans; yet, with a few words, a sleigh of hand almost, a particular relationship is set up: the presence in the text of Indigenous Americans, and with them, “Aboriginality,” is actually testimony to their exclusion from theoretical civil society and real citizenship.

This unconventional approach will allow for a rereading of Hobbes’ state of nature, highlighting its uncertain epistemological status, and identifying the imagined, and largely prejudicial, relation to the Americas transpiring from the text (first section). Building on our reading of Hobbes, we will then conceptualize this relation to the Americas as an “Aboriginal imaginary,” where Aboriginality is the antithetical counterpart of a ‘civility’ taking more and more the form of an ongoing, continuous, and linear process of ‘civilization’ (second section). Highlighting these connections between social contract theories, the Americas, and Europe’s emerging self-understanding as ‘civilized’ can play a critical role in the discipline of political theory, showing its deep connections with colonialism, and proposing a dialogue with other social sciences, more influenced by a Foucauldian epistemology.

## 1. Hobbes' state of nature:

### A) ... *fact and fiction*<sup>4</sup>

Linking the state of nature to the Americas is particularly challenging when studying Hobbes, for two main reasons: (1) the references to the Americas in his writings, including published works and correspondence, are scarce and (2) the state of nature as presented in the *Leviathan* intuitively tends to be read as a thought experiment. Yet, I argue in this section that Hobbes conveys in his writing, more or less willingly, a particular vision of the Americas, informing his state of nature, and in consequence, his whole political theory.

For Hobbes, “*the savage people in many places of America, (...) live at this day in that brutish manner, [the state of nature].*” (Hobbes, 1968, p. 187) This quotation is aptly situated in the chapter detailing the living conditions under the state of nature. The chapter is very famous, giving a vivid picture of Hobbes' pessimistic purview on human nature, and this passage in particular is often quoted. Scholars who only quote the previous sentence (“It may peradventure be thought there was never such a time nor condition of war as this; and I believe it was never generally so, over all the world...”) often insist that Hobbes' state of nature is not real, neither actual nor historical. However, we see when considering the passage in full, that the historical status of the state of nature, as presented in the *Leviathan*, is much more nuanced and uncertain. Yet, many scholarly readings of this passage still characterize the state of nature in Hobbes as a “logical abstraction”, “a hypothetical condition”, “a theoretical construct”. (Macpherson, 1968, pp. 40-41) Pushed to the extreme, these readings can lead to use rational choice theory to interpret Hobbes and compare his social contract to a prisoners' dilemma. The state of nature then becomes a psychological experiment. Hobbes' own writing easily lends to such an interpretation as his description of “solitary” natural men is focused on psychological attributes, whether they are passions, senses, or faculties.

Even if we concede characterizing Hobbes' state of nature as mythical, abstract and imaginative,<sup>5</sup> we have to recognize as well that just as much could be said about the Americas. Traveling literature may pretend to give precise accounts of the new Continent and its populations, what remains are very subjective, biased, ill-informed descriptions, mixing in nascent ethnography with mythology, dreamt antipodes and marvelous beings.<sup>6</sup> Yet, these descriptions often function as a factual illustration, a call to common knowledge and the examples chosen by an author are never an

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<sup>4</sup> The recurrent question asked about states of nature is whether we ought to consider them as fact or fiction, I mean to suggest by this title that states of nature can be both, or more precisely, that the author and readers may consider it as a fiction meant to serve the narrative of the social contract. But, as with any good fiction, it does not forbid realism, or may be based on ‘actual events and people.’ See for instance Ashcraft, R. (1969). Locke's State of Nature: Historical Fact or Moral Fiction. *American Political Science Review*, 62, 898–915.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Oakeshott, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> For critical accounts of the traveling literature on the Americas, widely circulated in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, see (Dickason, 1997; Lestringant, 1994; Pagden, 1986; Todorov, 1982).

innocent choice. They are meant to speak to the contemporary reader, form a common ground through which the reader can relate to the rest of the argumentation and get acquainted with the more original or even ground-breaking ideas of the author. And, to Hobbes' contemporary readership as well, the "logical abstraction" of the state of nature was not so obvious. Even if Hobbes devoted relatively little space in his writings to the issue of "savagery" and the reality of state of nature, his correspondence shows that this was certainly an important question for his readers:

I am being hounded with syllogisms designed to prove to me that the state of nature in the strict sense (such as you show it to be in your Politics) has never existed in the world. It is no use if I say that this state existed before there were any towns, cities, or republics in the world, before there were even any pacts or agreements between men. I have argued that this state still exists in America; that savages wage a war of all against all among themselves; that after the death of Noah, his three sons, Shem, Japhet, and Ham, could, if they had wanted to, have waged a war of that kind; and that this state of nature is therefore possible. But they maintain that there have always been families in the world, and that since families are little kingdoms, they exclude the state of nature; besides, they say that when there are no fathers as heads of families, the eldest child is deemed owner of his father's property because of his right of primogeniture or first possession by lot: this, they say, removes the right of every man to every thing. Please enlighten me on this, so that I may force these stubborn people to see reason.<sup>7</sup>

This passage is not from Hobbes but from Francois Peleau. It shows that, at the time, many contemporaries were looking for historical proof of Hobbes' "thought experiment" and took Hobbes' comments on the Americas very seriously.<sup>8</sup> However, it also shows that this claim — "savages" in America live in a state of nature— was open to debate. We see here that it is very important for Hobbes to show that "savages" in America do not have proper government because he associates their rule with customs and more specifically, patriarchal power. Recognizing them government would mean recognizing the legitimacy of traditionalist and paternalist theories of sovereignty, the very theories Hobbes wants to counter in his *Leviathan*.

In the correspondence as well, we see that the Americas only play a supporting role, serving a larger argument, meant to undercut patriarchal accounts of sovereignty. The issue then is not whether or not Hobbes's state of nature was meant as a historical or geographical postulate rather than as an analytical construct fitting his "scientific" approach of political matters. Quoting Richard Ashcraft, it seems indeed that "the state of nature ... is clearly an analytical construct, but if it is judged to be *only* that, some of the substance and effect of Hobbes's argument will be missed." (Ashcraft, 1971, p. 1088; my own emphasis) Once we stop considering the two possibilities as mutually exclusive, but instead acknowledge the complicated, mixed and even paradoxical, epistemological status of the state of nature, new lines of enquiry and interpretations arise. Rather than asking whether Hobbes' state

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<sup>7</sup> Source: Letter 95: [22 October/] 1 November 1656 François Peleau to Hobbes, from Bordeaux. *The Correspondence of Thomas Hobbes*. Volume I: 1622-1659. *Intelec Past Masters Online*.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note, as Skinner highlights in his paper "The Ideological Context of Hobbes's Political Thought," that Hobbes' reception in England and on the continent was quite different. It may be significant here that Hobbes' interlocutor is French and referring to Parisian discussions. (Skinner, 1966) Peleau is also quoted and analysed by Tuck in his introduction to the *Leviathan*, introduction in which, on the matter of the historicity of Hobbes' state of nature, he concludes: "it is clear that he envisaged the kind of conflict which constituted the state of nature as something which could straightforwardly arise in practice, and which had frequently done so."

of nature is fact *or* fiction, one should recognize that it may be both, and this blurred boundary between fact and fiction may be quite a strength for his theory: the state of nature gains a lot of weight after the “discovery” of the Americas, suddenly the origins of mankind are not just a tale or myth taught for the excitement of European populations, bored with their own culture and longing for exoticism. They gain, from the European perspective a realistic caution, Columbus found these origins on a New Continent; and for political theorists, it was definitively worth the trip. It is thus our turn to take the state of nature seriously,<sup>9</sup> as symptomatic of a particular articulation of nature and difference—of the utmost consequence for Western relations with indigenous populations around the world.

B) “*American imaginaries*” in the *Leviathan*.

The excerpt from Chapter 13, quoted above, can be used to support two points about the state of nature: 1) its possible existence, past and present; 2) it also suggests that Hobbes’ perceptions of the America and its inhabitants fit its conception of the state of nature, and vice versa. It is not surprising, then, to find that the key-features of Hobbes’ state of nature (at the level of description) tellingly echo themes often found in the traveling literature on the Americas, in particular, the far away-long ago fallacy and the consideration of indigenous societies as ultimately deficient or lacking. On the first point, the text gives us a clear indication of the historical status of his state of nature: Hobbes does not think there has ever been a generalized state of nature but he believes it to be the condition, past and present, of “savage people.” It is made clear in this passage that “savage people” do really exist, according to Hobbes, in the Americas and that when he refers to “savage people,” he does not just mean a very rare (accidental) occurrence (aka. a savage occurrence among civilized peoples); it is the normal, stable, condition of many societies, more so even, their only option. As for Locke later on, and most social contract theorists, Europe’s own past is mistakenly understood as America’s present.

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<sup>9</sup> Among authors who have taken Hobbes’ state of nature and his references to the Americas ‘seriously’ we can mention: Beate Jahn, Charles Mills, and Richard Ashcraft. (Ashcraft, 1971, 1972; B. Jahn, 1999; Beate Jahn, 2000; Mills, 1997) By comparison, much more work has been done on Locke and the Americas. Recent scholarship on Locke has tackled the relationship between Locke and the Americas, notably, through an analysis of his direct involvement with American colonization and the politics of Carolina, through the Earl of Shaftesbury. Barbara Arneil’s work, *John Locke and America: the Defence of English Colonialism*, was especially influential (Arneil, 1996). Already before Arneil’s extensive work on the question, we should note a few significant contributions to this topic: most notably, James Tully’s chapter entitled “Rediscovering America: the Two Treatises and Aboriginal Rights” in his work *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts* (Tully, 1993) but also, a few years sooner, “The Uses of America in Locke’s Second Treatise of Government” by H. Lebovics (Lebovics, 1986) or “Locke’s State of Nature” by A. J. Simmons (Simmons, 1989). Since Arneil’s publication, several publications have come out: “Locke’s *Second Treatise* and the Literature of Colonization,” by M. A. Michael in 1998 (Michael, 1998), and more recently “Locke, Liberalism and Empire,” by Duncan Ivison, in 2003 (Ivison, 2003), as well as “John Locke, Carolina, and the Two Treatises of Government” by David Armitage in 2004 (Armitage, 2004).

On the second point, the passage gives us a caricatured picture of “savage people”: they have no government at all and very likely no industry nor reason. These perceptions are not very sophisticated and yet, still echo the common perceptions of the Americas as propagated by the traveling literature of the time. The second sentence of the passage “for the savage people in *many* places of America” seems faithful to the *air du temps*, considering the Americas as the epitomic geographical location of savagery (while allowing for the possibility that empires, Aztec or Inca, may not qualify). In this regard, it is important to note that in the *Leviathan* and in Hobbes’ other writings, almost every occurrence of the term “savage” is accompanied in the same sentence by the presence of the term “America”.<sup>10</sup>

“Savagery” despite its depreciatory connotations does not imply lack of humanity, or even a denial of the status of humans. Looking at the rest of Chapter 13, it is clear that “savage people” for Hobbes undoubtedly partake of humanity, and thus would also be defined as he does “man” generally speaking. What is thus their difference, if not in their very nature? They are not different men or sub-humans; they are men *in a different condition*, a condition which seems to impede some of their faculties. Among these impeded faculties, we find that of morality. Indeed, one fundamental characteristic of Hobbes’ state of nature is its amorality. This reminds us of the old arguments already proposed by Spanish theologians, about “savages”’ ignorance of natural law (suggesting amorality) or violation of basic natural laws (suggesting immorality).<sup>11</sup> However, for Hobbes—and this is his great originality—there can be no Law prior to the institution of a common power. The distinction and contrast between natural and civil law dear to Thomist scholastics disappear.

Key to the state of nature is thus the possibility and even the necessity to come out of it, the “savage” men mentioned by Hobbes then are in a paradoxical situation. They obviously do not live a solitary life (Hobbes recognized them earlier a family-like form of government) yet they somehow find themselves “stuck” in a state of nature, missing the possibility to come out of it. The paradox is at the heart of their very being: they are considered to possess all human faculties, at least *in potentio*, as those are shared universally by natural and civil men alike, but they are still lacking the qualities inherent to *civilization*, to be understood here literally, as the process of becoming “civil.” This situation can be illuminated by looking at other references to “savages” in the *Leviathan*.

Another interesting example of his usage of the “savages” argument comes later in the text, in Chapter 30:

Wherein they [those who maintain there are no sufficient principles of reason to sustain sovereign power] argue as ill, as if the savage people of America should deny there were any grounds or principles of reason so to build a house as to last as long as the materials, because they never yet saw any so well built. Time and industry produce every day new knowledge. And as the art of well building is derived from principles of reason, observed by industrious men that had long studied the nature of materials, and the diverse effects of figure and proportion, long after mankind began, though poorly, to build: so, long time after men have begun to constitute Commonwealths, imperfect and apt to relapse into disorder, there may principles of reason be found out, by industrious meditation, to make

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<sup>10</sup> Three instances of the use of the term ‘savages’ in the *Leviathan* each followed by ‘of the Americas’ (Chapters 13, 30, 46). This association is also found in Hobbes other works, for instance the *Elements of Law*, the “Answer to Sir W. Davenant’s Preface,” the “Answer to Bishop Bramhall”. (Hobbes, 1992)

<sup>11</sup> See for instance, the exchange between Las Casas and Sepulveda, the Valladolid controversy. (Pagden, 1987)

their constitution, excepting by external violence, everlasting.  
(ch. 30; Hobbes, 1968, p. 378)

Hobbes' point here is to show that it is not because some individuals or even communities do not know of a particular principle of reason that it does not exist. It just has not been discovered by them yet. Reason is not failing here but rather men are deficient. We could think of many examples he could have borrowed from European cultures yet he chose to refer to "savage people" in his critique. "Savage people" work here as a counter-example and are peripheral to the main argument, anecdotic in fact. Hobbes wants to appeal to common sense and chooses an obvious statement: it almost sounds like, what better example of deficient men than "savages" from the Americas? It is not because "savage people" *obviously* cannot build proper houses and know nothing of sound construction that we have to infer that no such houses and the art of construction are impossible. Just as telling, is the fact that construction is used here as an analogy to reason. This passage echoes a common perception at the time: industry (building) is seen as directly related to reason and we could extrapolate that industry is the sign of reasonable action for Hobbes. In other words, it is not because, for Hobbes and his contemporary readership, "savage people" *obviously* cannot reason and build proper governments that we have to infer that no such reasonable principles and the art of civil government are impossible.

The third mention of the "savages of America" in the Leviathan is found in Chapter 46, entitled "Of Darkness from Vain Philosophy, and Fabulous Traditions" and the passage concerned reinforces the picture sketched above:

The savages of America, are not without some good moral sentences; also they have a little arithmetic, to add, and divide in numbers not too great: but they are not therefore philosophers. For as there were plants of corn and wine in small quantity dispersed in the fields and woods, before men knew their virtue, or made use of them for their nourishment, or planted them apart in fields, and vineyards; in which time they fed on acorns, and drank water: so also there have been divers true, general, and profitable speculations from the beginning; as being the natural plants of human reason. But they were at first but *few in number*; men lived upon *gross experience*; there was *no method*; that is to say, *no sowing, nor planting of knowledge by itself*, apart from the weeds, and common plants of error and conjecture: And the cause of it being the want of leisure from procuring the necessities of life, and defending themselves against their neighbours, it was impossible, till the erecting of great commonwealths, it should be otherwise. (my own emphasis)

Native populations of the New Continent find themselves again associated with limited knowledge, possibly erroneous. The metaphor is telling, just as you may find a few, rare, crops in wilderness, you would find in the same wilderness natural, basic, speculations; however, this is nothing in comparison to the crops agriculture can yield. The quantitative difference is so strong that it almost suggests a qualitative difference: the one indeed separating the state of nature from civil society.

To sum up, we see here how the American imaginaries are at work in these passages: "savage people" are associated with short-sightedness, lack of knowledge and philosophy, lack of study and lack of industry.<sup>12</sup> These deficiencies are considered obvious to Hobbes and furthermore, we must infer that

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<sup>12</sup> Lack of science and industry, famously characteristic of Hobbes' state of nature, is echoed in *The Elements of Law*: "For those men who have taken in hand to consider nothing else but the comparison of magnitudes, numbers, times, and motions, and their proportions one to another, have thereby been the authors of all those



his rhetorical choice (the analogy and the calling upon “savage people” to show the absurdity of his opponents’ claims) indicates he thinks they will be obvious to his readership as well.

Hobbes’ state of nature provides us with a rather simple, stripped-down, and also extremist version of the American imaginaries propagated by 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century traveling literature.<sup>13</sup> Hobbes drops the marvellous and mythical America but falls prey recurrently to the far away—long ago fallacy,<sup>14</sup> and gives us a picture of American communities as lacking industry, proper government, and potentially reason altogether. More poetically, they’re also missing “arts” and “science” and the welcome “excellences” and niceties of life: “that pleasure and beauty of life, which peace and society are wont to bring with them.” (*De Cive*, 1) Three decades later, another political theorist will provide a much more extensive and detailed use of the Americas for the sake of his social contract theory. In the *Treatises on Government*, Locke provides us with acknowledged references to the traveling literature and multiple American illustrations. Locke’s state of nature may be more comfortable than Hobbes’ and his American illustrations more sophisticated, it remains that he also instrumentalizes the Americas as an example of ‘uncivility’ and thus reproduces the same movement of exclusion initiated by Hobbes.<sup>15</sup> For Hobbes and Locke, long-term rationality ultimately drives men to come to terms with the necessity of the social contract. A whole group of people staying, through the passage of time, in a state of nature fails to obey the laws of Reason, either through their own fault, or because their environment has stopped them from doing so.

Depictions of the new continent in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe still provide readers with a sense of exoticism, and the excitement of “strangeness” yet, in Hobbes (and Locke, after him), this strangeness is built through a unique, sharp, contrast between state of nature and civil society. This construction of difference and its mapping on the social contract theory mechanism, opposing state of nature and civil society is what I have called Aboriginality: as we’ll see in the next section, it is better understood in conjunction with the development of the notion of ‘civilization.’

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excellences, wherein we differ from such savage people as are now the inhabitants of divers places in America; and as have been the inhabitants heretofore of those countries where at this day arts and sciences do most flourish.” (Hobbes, 1992; part 1, chapter 13)

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted as well that Hobbes’ state of nature, at that level, is fairly conventional. First, these descriptions echo rather faithfully all the recurrent themes of the traveling literature on the Americas; secondly, similar ones can also be found in other political and legal theorists at the time.

<sup>14</sup> Other texts reiterate the fallacy. See for instance, *De Cive*, chapter 1, “Of the state of men without civil society:

“They of America are examples hereof, even in this present age: other nations have been in former ages; which now indeed are become civil and flourishing, but were then few, fierce, short-lived, poor, nasty, and destroyed deprived of all that pleasure and beauty of life, which peace and society are wont to bring with them.” (Hobbes, 1992)

It is expected still, since as explained above, the very mechanism of social contract theory, with its three steps-moments, leads to mixed chronological perspectives.

<sup>15</sup> [Note: Locke’s mobilization of the Americas is also studied in the original thesis chapter, inspiring this paper. For sake of brevity, I have focussed here on Hobbes only, because less literature is available on that topic.]

## 2. Civility and its other: Aboriginality silenced

It is not a coincidence that the success of American traveling literature is contemporary to the development of the notion of civility, and later, that of civilization. Social contract theory, resting on the key contrast between state of nature and civil society is also an important factor in the development and shifts of the “civil” terminology. Yet, as Bruce Buchan notes, in an article on Scottish Enlightenment, “political scientists and social theorists, despite having focussed many of their analyses on civil society (as distinct from state), many of whom have even revived the term ‘civilization’ in international relations, have not paid sufficient attention to the linguistic and discursive origins of ‘civilization’.”<sup>16</sup> A notable exception among political philosophers, however, is Charles Taylor, who, in his short book, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, and his subsequent major opus, *The Secular State*, devotes significant space to a discussion of “civility” in Renaissance Europe.

### A) Civility and civilization, etymology:

Before discussing civility and civilization *per se*, as well as the role social contract theory had in their development, a few etymological remarks are in order. “Civil,” in English and French, and with it, most other cognates in European languages, originates from the Latin *civilis* (itself linked with *civis*, citizen, *civitas*, the community formed by citizens, as insisted upon by Cicero for instance).<sup>17</sup> Earlier usages in English and French relate to matters and affairs between citizens: one of the oldest usages mentioned in the *Oxford English Dictionary* corresponds to “Of, relating to, or designating a community, state, or body politic as a whole; esp. of or relating to the organization or internal affairs

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<sup>16</sup> “Contemporary political theorists have been slow to direct their enquiries toward the concept of civilization. This has led to curious omissions in recent literature, in particular to the burgeoning literature on civil society.” (Buchan, 2005, p. 177)

<sup>17</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists in the etymology section of its entry on “civil:”

Anglo-Norman and Middle French *civil* (French *civil*) (in legal use, of a case, law code, etc.) not belonging to criminal law, not belonging to canon law, relating to the relations between ordinary citizens (1290 in Old French), that concerns the citizen or his life, rights, etc. (1330), (of war) occurring within a society (1413 in *guerre civile*), polite, courteous (1460), not belonging to the military or religious spheres (1835) and its etymon classical Latin *civilis* of or relating to citizens, (of war) occurring between citizens, of or connected with such war, (of law) for citizens, of or according to such law, forensic, legal, determined by law, (of divisions of time) legally recognized, of or connected with the running of the state, political, relating to the citizen as distinct from the soldier, of or suited to one's status as a citizen, suitable for a private citizen, unassuming, unpretentious < *civis* citizen + *-ilis*. Compare Catalan *civil* (14th cent.), Spanish *civil* (12th cent.), Portuguese *civil* (14th cent.), Italian *civile* (13th cent.); also Middle Dutch *civil* (15th cent.; Dutch *civiel*), German *zivil* (17th cent.).

“civil, adj., n., and adv.”. OED Online. December 2011. Oxford University Press. 22 February 2012 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/33575>>.

Please note that the meaning discussed by Taylor, “polite, courteous” is only one among others, not the oldest one, only developing from the Renaissance onwards.

of such a body.” This use of “civil,” close to what is also meant by “civic” is certainly not foreign to social contract theory, as civil society is what turns men into potential citizens—it designates the relationships in a proper political community. However, starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, civil is also quickly accompanied by more subtle meanings and usages, one directly anticipating the notion of civilization: “That is in a condition of advanced social development such as is considered typical of an organized community of citizens; characteristic of or characterized by such a state of development; civilized,” and the other “Of a person or his or her attributes, behaviour, etc.: educated; cultured, cultivated; well-bred,” which, following Charles Taylor’s lead, will be discussed further below. (*OED Online*, see note 2 above.)

The substantive “civility” carries the same ambiguities, etymologically and historically. There are roughly three sets of senses: first, “senses relating to citizenship and civil order” (with examples dating as far back as 1384); second, “senses relating to secularity” (first used, it seems, in the works of Wycliffe); and third, “senses relating to culture and civilized behaviour” where notably, starting around the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, civility designates, “The state or condition of being civilized,” anticipating already, the idea of civilization as a process.<sup>18</sup> By comparison, “civilization,” as a word, is a recent invention: its historical development and its subtle shifts in meanings are quite instructive. Originally (mid-17<sup>th</sup> century) only used to denote a process, more precisely, “the action or process of civilizing or becoming civilized; (also) the action or process of being made civilized by an external force,” it soon came to be used as well to describe a state, “the state or condition of being civilized; human cultural, social, and intellectual development when considered to be advanced and progressive in nature.” From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, it has been used also to describe a bounded entity “a particular culture, society, and way of life as characteristic of a community of people; (also) a civilized society.<sup>19</sup>”

What these etymological remarks indicate and as Taylor explains in *Modern Social Imaginaries*, the idea of civility is the ancestor of our idea of civilization. The former is an idea that emerged and gained popularity in the Renaissance, a bright illustration of the articulation of the Ancient and the New. For Taylor, civility—and the same could be said about civilization—are concepts more easily defined negatively than positively: “*it is what we have and those others don’t*, those who lack the excellences, the refinements, the important achievements that we value in our way of life.” (Taylor, 2004, p. 35; my own emphasis) Among the Ancient values or virtues, recovered or rediscovered through the notion of civility is that of *polis* (through the intermediary of *civitas*, the Latin translation of the Greek *polis*): the Aristotelian idea that the city was the only setting where human beings (men) could live at the fullest of their potential. Civility thus refers to a particular type of government and by extension to a perennial contrast between urban and rural life (life in the forests/woods). Civility is also seen as a sign of order and ordered government—it is to be related to a contemporary notion, that of *état policé*

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<sup>18</sup> “civility, n.”. *OED Online*. December 2011. Oxford University Press. 22 February 2012  
<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/33581>>.

<sup>19</sup> “civilization, n.”. *OED Online*. December 2011. Oxford University Press. 22 February 2012  
<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/33584?redirectedFrom=civilization>>.

(police in the original sense of the word) a particular idea of government and social order, emerging in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and developed afterwards into a *raison d'état*.<sup>20</sup> (Taylor, 2004, p. 36)

However, while civilization carries with it ideas of stability, Renaissance intellectuals stressed the fragility of civility. Civility is neither well-established nor widespread—periods of barbarism are always possible (medieval violence is not evacuated and civil wars always lurking) and different levels of civility coexist in European societies:

In Renaissance times, the elites among whom this ideal circulated were all too aware that it was not only absent abroad, but all too imperfectly realized at home. The common people, though not on the level of savages in America and even being far above the European savage peoples of the margins (e.g. the Irish, the Russians), still had a long way to go. (Taylor, 2004, p. 37)

Culture, and its associated civility, for the Renaissance elite, is solely understood as innumerable, you have it or not, a lot or a little; conceiving of cultures in the plural form is possible but often limited to superficial differences between European ways of life. Another aspect of civility is “sound education and polite manners.” (Taylor, 2004, p. 38) Not only is civility associated with the *polis* in its political sense but also with *poli(ε)s* [French] as “polished” (to use a word most often used by the Scots at that time.) (Pagden, 1988, p. 33) This meant a reinforced focus on “discipline and training.” Civil manners are not the innate qualities of an elite but rather the privilege of good education.<sup>21</sup> Nature is seen as “originally wild,” something to be tamed. The distinction between nature and nurture, or in other terms, nature or culture, becomes central and this obviously plays a crucial role in the perceptions of the ‘savage’ populations of the Americas: “They did not see their difference from, say, Amerindians as that between two cultures, as we would say today, but as that between culture and nature.” (Taylor, 2004, p. 38) This is also true of the critiques of civility (those who associated these new mores with effeminacy or decadence, Rousseau, a century later being a brilliant example of the latter): when Amerindian populations are praised, it is often not for their culture but rather their lack thereof, their naturalness.<sup>22</sup>

With civility comes the idea of civilization, whereby civility and civil life are defined as a dynamic process, focusing on becoming civil rather than just being civil:

For civilization, unlike culture, suggests both a process (that of civilizing) and comparative evaluation. It describes a state, social, political, cultural, aesthetic - even moral and physical - which is held to be the optimum condition for all mankind, and this involves the implicit claim that only the civilized can know what it is to be ‘civilized’. (Pagden, 1988, p. 33)

Another advantage of the word ‘civilization’ in comparison to the term ‘civility’ is its easier opposability: “when Johnson refused to include the word ‘civilization’ in his dictionary, Boswell protested, ‘with great deference to him’, that he thought ‘civilization’ from to civilize better in the

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<sup>20</sup> Foucault did not study civility as such but a significant part of his works (including his lectures at the Collège de France) is devoted to the interrelated notions of police and of *raison d'état*.

<sup>21</sup> Very concretely, the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries are also a period where the nobility starts polishing its manners. This is the lengthy process described by Norbert Elias in *La Civilisation des Moeurs*.

<sup>22</sup> This is a key feature of primitivism, unfortunately long-lasting in today’s perceptions of Aboriginal populations as inherently close to nature, environmentally friendly, but unfortunately naïve and easily corrupted by outside (Western) culture, with all its vices. Montaigne appears as an exception, as he seems to praise the ‘Cannibals’ for their culture rather than their naturalness. (Montaigne, 2009; *Essai sur les Cannibales*)

sense opposed to barbarity than civility’.” (Quoted in Pagden, 1988, p. 34) This ‘better’ opposability is indeed what is at stake here. Of course, social contract theories are based on the contrast and opposability between state of nature and civil society, nature and civility. However, once we consider this state of nature as a historical and geographical possibility, located on the New Continent and among its ‘savage’ populations, we see that from this apparently static contrast, emerges a dynamic conception of civility, characteristic of modern times. This dynamism transforms civility into civilization. To paraphrase Taylor, to be civilized is what “we” have been able to achieve and others have not. Finding a precise content for civility or a threshold for civilization is almost impossible; it is always relative to the author’s own position. The idea of civilization cannot be understood, without its negative companion, what it is not, what it develops again, what it leaves behind in order to flourish. This unfortunate companion (used as a *repoussoir*) is not barbarism, a referent too Ancient and violent, but instead the emerging idea of Aboriginality.

### B) *Aboriginality or the search for the uncivilized:*

The themes developed through the traveling literature on the Americas all prepare the ground for the emergence of the idea of civilization: the Americas come to represent at different levels the uncivilized or the pre-civilized. The very possibility of such an instance is discovered by European through this literary encounter. However, with social contract theory, this particular understanding of the Americas gains unprecedented potency: working in conjunction with the far away-long ago fallacy as well as the focus on naturalness, the state of nature transforms the Americas in an Aboriginal space. More so than the obvious contraries barbarous or savage, Aboriginal becomes the true antithesis of civilization, and simultaneously the key to its self-understanding. In Hobbes’ (and after him, Locke’s) state of nature, the marvellous and mythical are dropped, while deficiencies keep being stressed, one particular aspect rises to the foreground: the inappropriateness of forms of government based and legitimized by kinship. The separation between the personal, patriarchal, and the political is marked in the sand, and here to stay, it is a boundary essential to modern humanism in its political version. American imaginaries lose some of their exoticism and fantasy; they become rigidified and rationalized into Aboriginal imaginaries.

The term Aboriginality is to be understood here in its etymological, Latin, sense: *ab-origine*. Aboriginal and its composites literally designate the beginnings, those from the beginnings. Although ‘Aborigine’ and ‘aboriginal’ were first used to refer to the “race of the first possessors of Italy and of Greece,” they came to designate more generally “the original inhabitants of a country”.<sup>23</sup> The word, Aboriginality, is chosen here despite not being used very commonly to designate the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, to highlight the search for origins that the America came to incarnate for the Europeans. It represents a *very specific* relationship to otherness; both a radical and original otherness. It is associated, of course, for Europeans at the time, with ‘savagery’ but this is

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<sup>23</sup> "aboriginal, adj.". OED Online. December 2011. Oxford University Press. 22 February 2012  
<[http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/33584?redirectedFrom=\[...\]](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/33584?redirectedFrom=[...])>.

misleading. What is significant for social contract theorists, in their use of Indigenous American populations as illustrative of the state of nature, is not as much their barbarism, violence, or indeed 'savagery.' Instead, what is relevant is their double originality: the contrast in lifestyle they offer to Europeans (original as strange and foreign) and the window upon the origins of mankind they're supposedly providing (original as prior and primordial). The Americas seen through the lens of the Aboriginal imaginary provide both puzzling novelty, and faithfulness to the origins. The anachronistic word, Aboriginality, is chosen in order to encapsulate this equivocation, while still conjuring images of wilderness, uncontrollability and behaviours impossible to foresee and rationalize.

Both senses of original are essential to the mechanism of the social contract and explain the attraction of the state of nature: original as different and original as primordial. The contrast between Aboriginality and civilization is already visible in the traveling literature and the American imaginaries it conveys. Yet, America transformed into Aboriginality will take on its full meaning with the social contract theorists. As we have shown in this chapter, the Aboriginal part of the equation takes precedence over the reality (or rather perceived reality) of the Americas and the inhabitants—reduced to the status of interesting anecdotes—while the Aboriginal imaginary, through the artifice of the state of nature, becomes the cornerstone of modern political thought; the logical foundation for the civil state and *sic*, "civilization." This distinction between American imaginaries and a single Aboriginal imaginary is crucial for understanding the subtleties and preconceptions making possible the idea of civilization and civilizational thinking, which came to dominate the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This distinction also reveals a different relationship to nature, and brings new light on the modernity brought about by social contract theorists such as Hobbes and Locke.

Said slightly differently, the transformation of the rich and marvellous American imaginaries into bare Aboriginal imaginary, through the fennel of the state of nature, is one of the elements making civilization—as a thought, as a self-understanding for Westerners—possible. Aboriginality is the link between the recurrent themes defining American imaginaries and human nature seen through the lens of the state of nature. It finds the non-civil in accounts of the Americas, abstracts it into a state of nature, but then re-assigns a particular identity to the natural, the non-civil, Americans, denying them the possibility of modern subjectivity. This mechanism is all the more significant that it operates at the root of any theory, at the level of its ontology and anthropology.

Once the idea of civilization, our modern understanding of it, is problematized, and the contrast civilization-Aboriginality highlighted, some of Hobbes' comments become particularly telling. Hobbes does not use the term civilization or any of its cognates in the *Leviathan* yet, in Hobbes' correspondence, we find eloquent expressions of what Taylor has associated with civility:

But so far forth as the fancy of man has traced the ways of true philosophy, so far it hath produced *very marvellous effects to the benefit of mankind*. All that is beautiful or defensible in *building*; or marvellous in *engines and instruments of motion*; whatsoever *commodity* men receive from the observations of the heavens, from the description of the earth, from the account of time, from walking on the seas; and whatsoever distinguisheth the *civility of Europe*, from

the *barbarity of the American savages*; is the workmanship of fancy, but guided by the precepts of true philosophy.<sup>24</sup> (my own emphasis)

While discussing the importance of memory, Hobbes also stresses the importance of progress in building industry, transportations, but also “the commodity” and their associations with science, true philosophy, on the one hand, and fancy, on the other. These are seen as “benefiting” humanity, and are understood to be key to the distinction between a “civil” Europe and a “savage” America. Hence, for Hobbes, civility is not just the quality of civil society, the institutions, government, and citizenship logically resulting from the social contract, it is also a socio-cultural context, allowing for the development of culture, knowledge, philosophy and science. In *Questions concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*, he denounces the “savage ignorance” of “those men [who] have not, or have not long had laws and commonwealth, from whence proceeds science and civility.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the idea of civil life as a comfortable life is taken up in *The Elements of Law*, when describing by contrast “the estate of security” or rather, lack thereof, “nature hath placed us in:”

The estate of hostility and war being such, as thereby nature itself is destroyed, and men kill one another (as we know also that it is, both by the experience of savage nations that live at this day, and by the histories of our ancestors, the old inhabitants of Germany and other now civil countries, where we find the people few and short lived, and *without the ornaments and comforts of life, which by peace and society are usually invented and procured*): he therefore that desireth to live in such an estate, as is the estate of liberty and right of all to all, contradicteth himself. For every man by natural necessity desireth his own good, to which this estate is contrary, wherein we suppose contention between men by nature equal, and able to destroy one another.<sup>26</sup> (§ 12 in Chapter 14; my own emphasis)

Not only does Hobbes insist on the benefits of civility, and civil countries, as ornaments and comforts, celebrating a certain level of artifice in daily life and surroundings, but also he stresses the rationality of such a civility: a man in his right mind cannot not want it.

Even if, in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, the dynamism of the relation between Aboriginality and civilization is not yet too visible, the text and more precisely, the construction of a state of nature illustrated by references to the Americas, opens up the possibility of a developmentalist conception of history (to be found later more explicitly in Locke<sup>27</sup>). This “developmentalism” and the idea of civilization attached to it are important at many levels: shedding new light on old texts, highlighting critically modern conceptions of history and human nature, and also, filling in a gap in the scholarship. This aspect of Hobbes’ work is often ignored by historians of political thought, or if acknowledged, not really explored nor critiqued as problematic. The developmental framework is characteristic of modern political thought, and indeed, we can find such conceptions of history, and political history, flourishing during the 18th and the 19th centuries. For this reason, the significance of the prejudicial conceptions it carries should not be underestimated.

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<sup>24</sup> “Answer to Sir William Davenant's Preface before Gondibert” in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*. (Hobbes, 1992)

<sup>25</sup> *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*. (Hobbes, 1992)

<sup>26</sup> *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*. (Hobbes, 1992)

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Hindess, 2007.

The inconspicuous prevalence of “developmental” perspectives combined with the resistance of the far away-long ago has marked for a long time the field of political theory and may still be influential today. This could explain the relative lack of attention devoted to the state of nature and its epistemological status among recent scholarship in political theory. Hindess’ study of Locke’s state of nature suggests that we might not have really overcome this “common prejudice” and that “these types of developmental assumptions” are not seen as problematic by many practitioners and students of politics. We might expect this not to be the case anymore with the rise of post-colonial studies in social sciences and the critical stance it encourages towards Western worldviews and assumptions. However, political theory and the history of political thought, as a specialized disciplinary field, seem slow to catch up in comparison to other disciplines (anthropology and linguistics for instance). As Hindess explains, following the quotation above:

This, of course, suggests another reason why the developmental assumptions at work in Locke’s arguments have received little critical attention from political theorists and historians of political thought, which is that few of them have seen these assumptions as being in any way problematic. These, or closely related, developmental assumptions also underlie our own conception of civil society, which is rather different from Locke’s. Consequently, they play a central role in the geo-political understandings that dominate the contemporary system of states. (Hindess, 2007, p. 7)

## **Conclusion:**

The Renaissance writers and the Scholastics may have believed the “state of nature” should yield to civil society, yet, there was never a necessity in this development, and nature and civility were not conceived as mutually exclusive. Indeed, the Americas were ‘proof’ that societies could very well maintain themselves in a state of “arrested development.” Hobbes represents in this regard a subtle but fundamental shift. With social contract theories, Americas are demythologized, rationalized and turned into an Aboriginal imaginary. At their heart, these political theories carry the spirit of civilization, and a very particular relationship to difference and otherness, one subsumed under the neologism “Aboriginality.” Aboriginality offers for these authors the key to human nature, not a standard, unqualified human nature however, but rather a bare, out of history, human nature. This is paradoxical because at the same time, social contract theorists start to conceive of men and mankind as historical, projecting themselves in the future, anticipating, and building something together. The social contract is not just the defining moment of politics and sovereignty, its role and limits; it is too an imperative for human beings to live up to their potential, to come to their reason and refuse old patriarchal models of subjection.

With social contract theory, human nature, and nature more broadly speaking, is conceived such that it is paradoxically natural for human beings to overcome their own nature. Human nature is split in two elements, nature (1) indicating the original essence of humanness and nature (2) indicating the (teleological) truth of humanness. These elements may already be found in classical philosophy (in Aristotle notably) but with the social contrast theorists, these two natures oppose themselves rather



than complement each other. Nature (1) ought to be negated in order for nature (2) to flourish: this is especially visible in terms of sociability in Hobbes –the natural associability of man is necessarily producing the contract and hence, the civil state. Although some natural rights subside, the figure of man (holder of these rights) is irremediably modified.<sup>28</sup> When illustrated with ‘real’ people, this logic becomes an opposition between Aboriginality and civilization. In order to become ‘civilized,’ one has to overcome Aboriginality. For Indigenous American populations, being bound to Aboriginality gives them an unbecoming status in this logic. They are outside of the ‘civilizing’ process and unable to overcome their original nature (1). The only way for them to become civil is by stopping to be Aboriginal altogether; this suggests harsh colonization, paternalistic policies aiming towards the always vain and violent project of complete acculturation and transformation of the individuals into Christian Europeans.

We have here a powerful expression of the humanism Foucault was so worried about. The idea of human nature works as an anthropological premise, supposedly universal. Yet, ingrained in the anthropology of the social contract is a flawed and uneven relationship: rather than a universal abstract bearer of rights, what we have constructed here is a ‘civil’ man, looking more and more like a ‘civilized’ man. This would not be as much of a problem, if civilization was thought universal, but it is far from being the case; the idea of civilization only works in opposition to the non-civilized, what we have coined ‘Aboriginality.’ Those who find themselves on the wrong side of the equation are irremediably excluded from citizenship, and compelled to leave room for civilization (by either literally ceding ground or by assimilating to the dominant society). This civilization is always that of others of course because their own cannot be seen and recognized; after all, they’ve been constructed as civilization-less, primordial and irremediably strange. American Indigenous populations are present in social contract theory, but only in order to be denied the status of civility and to stress the inferiority of their own way of life: rather than being part of a racial contract, they are the anti-contract, the living impossibility of the social contract, an exceptional state of nature unable to progress into anything more fulfilling.

We may today, in our politics, have shed away many of the prejudices of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century traveling literature, however, modern conceptions of subjectivity, civility, and citizenship are deeply embedded. Superficial accommodations and formal expansions of the boundaries do not suffice. What a Foucauldian approach of the social contract theorists shows is the depth of the problem: the distinction between Aboriginality and civilization is at the heart of modern political subjectivity. It is only through careful examinations and genealogies that we can start to “decolonize political theory,” find new ways to think the political, ways in which Indigenous populations can stop being assigned the role of the anti- or pre-modern.

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<sup>28</sup> The tension between nature (1) and nature (2) is also perfectly visible within Rousseau’s version of the social contract, Rousseau going even as far as introducing the idea of perfectibility to explain the necessary loss of nature (1).

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